Southeast Asian Spatial Histories and Historiographies: A re-examination

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Spatial Studies of the “Colonial” and “National”

In one of the few bibliographies of Southeast Asian architecture, titled “Nation, Identity and Architecture in Southeast Asia: a select bibliography,” published in the Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture (2000), librarian Lim-Yeo Pin Pin took on the challenging task of defining sub-categories. The result was a short list tabled under the first subheading “Southeast Asia” for works dealing with this larger geographical scope. This is followed by individual subheadings and works listed under “contemporary” nation states. The range of publications highlighted monographs, journal articles and other essays, an immediate assessment of work done for the period under scrutiny. Lim-Yeo listed a rather inclusive field of writers’ works that provided a good base to start discussion of Southeast Asia through spatial schemes. However, it is soon evident that there were still inconsistencies arising perhaps from the histories of such writing or even the political history of Southeast Asian places. The subheading “Indochina,” for example, collapsed the three nation states under former French colonization, while Brunei was absent. The range and number of publications so listed under countries, is also noticeably uneven across the countries.

The spatial historiography of Southeast Asia itself needs to be re-examined, in scope and subject. The roles that colonial and national frameworks have played in most of these writings historically, especially, must be scrutinized for what they are. The two conditions continue to haunt and undergird new writing on the various sub-fields related to architecture, landscape, urban planning and design. An understanding of production and the various contexts of their producers may allow us to better situate future work. The range of such work is large and in a preliminary survey such as this, works may be omitted. Also, the titles discussed here are mainly those found in the English language.

The formal recording and writing of spaces in Southeast Asia may be regarded as beginning with European colonization, through surveys, ethnographic writing and anthropological analyses. The evidence of the existence and histories of such spaces, however, are earlier if one considers the various textual formats for their discernment can include elements such as maps and even architecture and accompanying inscription on monuments and material culture. The early nomadic cultural groups and their oral traditions have left very little literary evidence of early histories apart from some groups like the Bataks. The European languages that these colonial accounts were written, and the collection of artifacts and archeological evidence in the western sphere, meant that scholars on Southeast Asia have still to cull material from colonial archives, artifact libraries and museums’ collections outside of the region, and to access them through language and dictates of these institutions.

The need for modernisation that occurred at varying speeds in Southeast Asian nations resulted from obtaining independence after World War II, by and large, and the need to radically transform political culture, society and even the very landscapes and spaces that nations demand, as described. Global and regional developmental politics required industrialization and the improvement of various indicators like literacy, health and sanitation, industrialization, gross national product, etc., transformed landscapes, urban planning and architecture, fundamentally and rapidly. In the rush to set up local professional bodies and schools in architecture and planning to match global standards and to practice worldwide, there were comparatively fewer persons who became involved in academic work to take over or continue such work after the colonial period, as most participated in “nation-building” projects. The result has been a general lack of local work in even the survey and recording of post-war architecture, not to mention more sustained scrutinies of the colonial literature or to formulate new positions for their analysis.

The spectres of colonialism are enmeshed with nationalist ones in many works. Take for example the two volumes of Indonesian Houses (2003 and 2008) edited by Schefold, Domenig, Nas and Wessing, published by the KITLV Press. As surveys and scholarly essays of vernacular architecture, these are valuable contributions to the ecumene even if some are reworked chapters from earlier volumes. In what
ways are the built forms Indonesian, and are Minangkabau and Bugis houses still Indonesian when *merantau* transfers such forms to peninsula Malaysia? Which structures on Borneo/Kalimantan are Indonesian and which are Malaysian?

In the past two decades, Southeast Asian architectural practice entangled with global economies has produced two genres of architectural publications. The first is typified by using or adapting regional traditions for house production, such as Robert Powell’s *The Asian house: contemporary houses of Southeast Asia* (1993) and other such work, that become “style guides” for the well-heeled and nouveau riche. The second intersected and supported global tourism in recreating resorts and hotel settings that purport to transport visitors into edenic and mythic environments, exemplified by Tan Hock Beng’s *Tropical Retreats: the poetics of place* (1996) and *Tropical Paradise* (2000). Both types of writing embed undertones carried over from colonialism, but are trans-national to align with regional and global human movements.

What follows in this essay is a discussion of the many issues that require attention and consideration. In particular, it shows why working only through colonial or national lenses and scopes is problematic. The historiographical scope is aimed at examining, rather than the politics of inclusion or exclusion of the various texts. Where discussed, the framing of the discourse is considered more important that the verity of scholarship of the works themselves. It hopes to be perceived as a commencement to look at these problems rather than brushing them aside.

**Problems of Historiography and Writing Architecture**

The best critique thus far of spatial discourses and their accompanying historiographical methods may be found in Abidin Kusno’s 2000 article in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture* titled “Imagining Regionalism, Re-Fashioning Orientalism: Some Current Architectural Discourses in Southeast Asia.” Using the works of Banister Fletcher, Spiro Kostof, Sumet Jumsai, Tay Kheng Soon and Ken Yeang, he analysed and problematized several theoretical frameworks around which their textual expositions are cast and framed.

Kusno’s article critiqued Fletcher’s project at length, indicated the introduction of Southeast Asia in its 18th edition of 1975, and exposed the various subjectivities bound within the hegemonic projects of architectural knowledge production especially Eurocentric ones. This was later developed into a chapter in his seminal work *Behind the Postcolonial: architecture, urban design and political cultures in Indonesia*. Somewhat intriguing, however, is the fact that Kusno did not discuss the subsequent “development” of the Southeast Asia sections in the 19th edition (1987) and 20th edition (1996). As if the hegemonies and tensions of labelling thus far are not enough, the respective editors John Musgrove and Dan Cruickshank subdivided and contained discussion under three headings: “Architecture of pre-colonial periods outside Europe,” “The architecture of colonial and post-colonial periods outside Europe,” and “Architecture of the 20th century,” once again as definitions trapped in Eurocentricism and the vicissitudes of exclusion. As the periodization demonstrates, the “colonial period” and “Europe” are deemed suitable and unproblematic devices to frame such architectural discourse.

Kusno’s critique of Jumsai’s work that it is cast in “civilisational” and “originary” terms will be discussed later in this essay. His analyses of “recent architectural discourses” that follow critique on Fletcher and Kostof, however, need to be contextualized. Firstly, the discussion of work by Jumsai, Tay and Yeang, although permitting useful observations of changes in scholarship since the Fletcher project, omits a great
number of works on the region both coming from there and the west. Secondly, all three are mainly influential practitioners (each in their own countries) who have published their theoretical ruminations and expositions. The works are derived from and framed against their experiences in practice and movements amidst the extant cultural spheres, and though important in that architects are examining their regional (and global) environment, these must be acknowledged as productions that complement their practice. The formulation of manifestos of practice and the demonstration of their resultant publications, are established means of practice in architectural, urban and landscape design. If we acknowledge the Fletcher project as a largely Eurocentric (and hence colonial) one, and the recent straddling post-colonial/national and practice concerns, how do scholars of Southeast Asia grapple with the method and scope to write about space and architecture?

We need to look elsewhere for models from which such historiographies may be examined critically. The cultural/historical analyses of the region, fortunately, comprise many intersecting and related disciplines or subfields some of which are of particular relevance to spatial studies. The multi-disciplinary scope may cross archeology, anthropology, art, urban geography, linguists, and of course, material culture. The analysis by Victor Lieberman of Southeast Asia’s pre-colonial history from the 9th century onwards is the most useful thus far. He proposed four stages of or approaches to history writing in Southeast Asia’s “early period,” and these were titled “Externalist” Historiography, “autonomous” historiography, the “Age of Commerce” thesis and his own, “A Fourth Approach.”

Paraphrasing Lieberman, the first “Externalist” phase was characterized by scholarship from Europe due to colonial interest in captured lands. The works rendered Southeast Asia as inert and passive not just because they were politically subjugated and penned by Europe, but also cast as subsidiary cultures of the two Asian powers as “Indianized” or “Sinicized” lands that were structurally or intrinsically influenced, with society and architecture as evidence. The next phase of “Autonomous” Historiography emerging in the 1930s, as the name suggested, examined and gave credence back to local and indigenous forces, that Islamization and early colonialism, in fact, did not fundamentally alter Southeast Asia’s inherent character. The quote by J.C. Van Leur using a ceramics analogy, that “the sheen of the world religions and foreign cultural forms is a thin and flaking glaze; underneath it the whole of the old indigenous forms has continued to exist,” (Van Leur, Indonesian Trade and Society, 1955), is cited to exemplify this framework. As long as global capitalism was not advanced in the west through high imperialism, the Asian world was an equal if not “quantitatively superior.”

The third phase termed “The Age of Commerce” emerged in the 1960s with the work of Anthony Reid. Reid examined the Malay-Indonesian world from the 15th to 17th centuries as a maritime one that connected its indigenous cultural forces and trade practices to global networks and hence these were subject to their accompanying political and economic shifts. The use of interdisciplinary texts extended discourse to much broader scopes including aspects of urban growth, that suggest that 5% of the region’s people lived in large cities by 1650. Its critique, however, was that its archipelagic focus obsfucated developments on mainland Southeast Asia that were rather different in indigenous politics, agriculture, as well as trade and cultural practices with land-connected Europe and the intermediate spaces of Eurasia. Lieberman’s work was then framed as a new approach to address the “imbalance” by contrasting mainland/archipelago formations but not be bound only by such dichotomies.

**Terminologies for region**

Unlike sub-regions of continents like Africa, the Americas and Europe to some extent, which have coasts that are fairly well defined to contain “land,” Southeast Asia as a region had been difficult to delineate geographically and historically because its boundaries were more nebulous and “fuzzy,” and these definitions have also vacillated, expanded or contracted over the years. Most refer to its post-World War II commencement in political spheres within SEATO, for alliance and defence purposes as bordered nation-states: it originally included Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) but eventually it was omitted. ASEAN, for which trade, security and culture had loosely created a group since its inception with 5 nations in 1967, is now extended to 10 countries.
The complexities associated with naming may be noted from the various definitions of Southeast Asia, at different times and by different peoples. In bio-geographical scopes, Malesia (and later Malaysia) was used to describe flora and fauna found in “the Malay archipelago” (Alfred Russel Wallace, 1869), until its political naming in 1963 complicated matters. It has been part of “Asia,” or “Asia Pacific,” and in between oceans as “the Indo-Pacific region.” Prehistory assigned it the place as “the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago” (Peter Bellwood, 1997), and linguistic studies define a large area called “Austronesia” with borders as far as Madagascar, New Zealand, Taiwan, the Hawaiian islands and Easter Island (Robert Blust). The term “Nusantara” enjoys wide usage in the Malay world, and seen from the great “poles” of China and India, the area is, respectively, “Further India” (and earlier as “Suwarnadvipa”) or “Nanyang” (the South Seas). It is often claimed through climatic or religious terms, as part of “the Tropics” or “the Islamic world” (Aga Khan Program).

Many vernacular architecture treatises under the term Austronesia include Taiwan which is north of the Philippines, and in archeology an important site where dispersal into the sea commenced. Sparkes and Howell went so far north as to include a work on the Ryukyu Islands between Taiwan and Japan in The House in Southeast Asia (2003). As Lieberman demonstrated, its naming; seen from the perspective of Eurasia, merits further attention. With such a wide range of definitions across the various disciplines and over different time periods, it requires researchers, especially for early historical periods, to be attentive to its variations.

Pre-history, Civilisations, and Views from the Sea
Recent findings in genetics and archeology inform us that early humans moved eastwards out of Africa towards the Fertile Crescent and then mainland Asia (Vincent Macaulay etal. 2005). Millenia later, Austronesians migrated seawards off the Asian tectonic plate (off the eastern and southern edges of Asia) into the islands of Southeast Asia and then to Oceania and Polynesia, and encountered the tropical and maritime zones (Peter Bellwood, 1997). To depart for the islands, they needed to reconfigure their societies and extant technologies towards one that could accommodate sea travel and construct dwellings on the discovered islands. The invention of and reliance on outrigger boat technology, as well as the high dependence on boat and travel concepts to annotate parts or whole vernacular houses and to connote political society, are indicative of this aspect of migration history.

Many scholars have worked on the maritime legacies, including Bronislaw Malinowski (Argonauts of the Western Pacific, 1922), Haddon and Hornell (Canoes of Oceania, 1938), Pierre-Yves Manguin (“Shipshape Societies: Boat Symbolism and Political Systems in Insular Southeast Asia”, 1986), and Stephen Oppenheimer (Eden in the East: The Drowned Continent of Southeast Asia, 1998). David Sopher had demonstrated how sea peoples lived perennially in boats and outrigger canoes, and more importantly formed differentiated political societies in the seas along the coasts of Southeast Asia – some of these also assumed later roles as “pirates” (The Sea Nomads: a study of the maritime boat people of Southeast Asia, 1965 and 1977). Many Southeast Asian communities were entirely comfortable living in boats but not on land. Adrian Horridge’s various investigations about sailing craft of Indonesia and the eastern archipelagoes (1978, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987) indicate that such sea-going vessels, in particular outrigger canoes, were continually improved technologically to meet the different maritime as well as land conditions.

In light of this, we may perhaps reassess Sumet Jumsai’s claims about the western Pacific realm in the book Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific (1988). Kusno is right to denounce this as a claim of origin – Jumsai had suggested westward migration and to some extent, global influence mainly from this “source.” However, Jumsai has cause to describe and celebrate the “water-based” origins of such a culture, that were transmitted seawards and particularly influencing dwellings and lives of island Southeast Asia. They permit us to be cognizant that influences on such dwellings and their cultures from manifest mainland groups may differ from archipelagic ones.

The Indic/Sinic Discourse and the“Great” Traditions
The use of the “Great Traditions” of India and China to explain phenomena in Southeast Asia is long established. Paul Wheatley’s The Golden Khersonese (1961) and Nāgara and Commandery: Origins of
the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions (1983) are key studies of early political economies altering the fortunes of Southeast Asian geography and history, as well as speculative descriptions of its urban conurbations, respectively. While sources from many languages were used befitting the multi-pronged “influences” in Southeast Asia, the key texts referenced were those of India and China used to describe the region “lying to the east of India and south of China.” The 1983 work followed the heels of two other works on urban histories of China (1971) and Japan (1978), and evidenced permanent built forms of these cities through “archeological, literary and epigraphic sources.”

As tributaries of ancient China and because parts of mainland Southeast Asia had been politically connected with or controlled by it (in particular Vietnam), it is not difficult to understand why such scholarship abounded, to view Southeast Asia from the Middle Kingdom’s dictates. Indeed, later diasporic Chinese groups had also impacted the growth of its many cities, as discussed in Johannes Widodo’s The Boat in the City: Chinese Diaspora and the Architecture of Southeast Asian Cities (2004). However, if such lenses construe architecture as being derivative of or development of Sinic models, the work will omit the opportunity to discuss parallel or implicit local spatial transformations. Similarly, as “Indianized states” in Southeast Asia, scholars have connected its Hindu-Buddhist architecture with India, for example Daigoro Chihara’s Hindu-Buddhist architecture in Southeast Asia (1996). However, it would diminish the dynamic “cosmopolitan” criss-crossings and site contingencies if we analyzed these as such.

Religion and religious influences may be perceived as veneers to the indigenous forms found in Southeast Asia, as discussed by Van Leur. The large corpus of early masonry architecture must undeniably be connoted as having been influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. The various works in the volume Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries (1986) edited by David Marr and Anthony Milner, demonstrate such connections, but that many of these were contingent upon local factors and traced to particular aspects of indigenous material cultures different from India and China. Such perceptions are important to account for the hybrid natures of many of these monuments which incorporate timber structures that have long deteriorated, as well as forms and ornamentations particular to these places. These is also new and “unique” inventions: the Bayon in Angkor, Cambodia; and Borobudur in Central Java must be analyzed as structures not encountered elsewhere.

Vernacular Architecture as Tradition
If the 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibition on “International Architecture” was the promulgation event for modernist architecture globally to affect practice and education, the 1964 one organized by Bernard Rudofsky titled “Architecture without Architects” at the same museum was an equally-potent signal that something else in the form of the vernacular existed, built by local communities and continued by “non-pedigreed” architects. Despite the criticism that the project itself aestheticized such works and failed to discuss the socio-cultural backgrounds of most of the exhibits, it remains a significant call to examine structures and contexts of “other” buildings and a lead-in to regionalist discussions a decade later. It informed and inspired scholars to launch serious academic work on a comparative scale not seen in prior work by Laugier and Semper based on the “vernacular,” and site the “local” as legitimate architectural discourse. Southeast Asia was represented by its sole representative Vietnam in Rudofsky’s book: the images and text serving as pictorial survey more than spatial documentation. It was equally cursorily represented in Enrico Guidoni’s Primitive Architecture (1975).

Izikowitz and Sørensen’s House in East and Southeast Asia: anthropological and architectural aspects (1982) may be seen as an early work on the vernacular in the region, and this is followed by Jacques Dumarcay’s The House in South-East Asia (1987). Rudimentary line drawings and images formed the basis for scholarship, as tentative volumes to study the indigenous house forms during a period of the 1980s where anxieties for acknowledging local identity loomed large. The project to recover and document these architectures commenced in different countries but varied in their emergence as publications according to the gazes and attention of scholars, in both “externalist” and local spheres. Works were more particular than comparative, as may be seen in Djauhari Sumindardja’s Traditional Housing in Indonesia (various volumes, 1970s), Josef Prijotomo’s Ideas and Forms of Javanese Architecture (1984), Kis-Joval et al., Banua Toraja: Changing Patterns in Architecture and Symbolism among the Sa’adan Toraja (1988), Alain Viaro, Traditional Architecture of Nias Island (2003), Nguyen
Apart from an initiative from the region based at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies to study these comparatively, to be discussed later, the comparative lens for such work lay in institutions outside Southeast Asia, in Australia and Europe. The Comparative Austronesian Project based at Australian National University and led by James Fox started to examine the region as part of Austronesia. It produced many volumes, including the important *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living*, (1993). A decade later, Sparkes and Howell edited *House in Southeast Asia: a changing social, economic and political domain* (2003), out of the Nordic Association of Southeast Asian Studies.

**Colonial Architecture and its Contents/Discontents**

As the 1998 edited volume by Roxana Waterson, *Architecture of Southeast Asia through travellers’ eyes* suggest, travel writing and accounts provide views of early sites and architecture in the region, before and during their extant transformation into colonial towns and ports. Town planning and architecture became instrumental to the colonial project, and apart from the buildings and urban spaces themselves as remnant texts to mark the period, the availability of textual material in different European languages supported the writing and recording of these structures.

Colonial and colonial-period architecture are often rendered as unproblematic constructs and developmental narratives by virtue of their existence in the landscape. Such positions were held by Jane Beamish and Jane Ferguson, with their *A History of Singapore Architecture: the making of a city* (1985) heralding the origins of a colonial-led state and society. The abundance of colonial forms has also led to works that describe them as types, like Robert Aiken’s *Imperial belvederes: the hill stations of Malaya* (1994) and Peter and Waveney Jenkins’ *The planter’s bungalow: a journey down the Malay Peninsula* (2007).

Gretchen Liu’s *In Granite and Chunam: the national monuments of Singapore* (1996) highlights the dilemma that even if such writing were cast in “national” frames, the absence of local materials or that in vernacular languages may lead to expositions that extend from colonial positions. Indeed, the reckoning with colonial literature or constructs is a situation that all writers of this period face, to interpret the verity of the texts themselves and their physical manifestation as architecture. Some of these attempts on writing would include A Ghafar Ahmad’s *British Colonial Architecture in Malaysia, 1800-1930* (1997) and Norma Alarcon’s *Philippine Architecture during the Pre-Spanish and Spanish periods* (1998).

The use of Benedict Anderson’s telescopic and spectral comparisons between metropole and colony is gaining momentum amongst writers, to scrutinize built forms as inter-related processes in both places. In this regard, the subject of colonial expositions is one that best permits this discussion. Such sites are located in the western sphere and organized for specific political reasons and occasions, but involve the representation and participation of colonized peoples away from the metropoles. Patricia Morton’s *Hybrid modernities: architecture and representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (2000) and Marieke Bloembergen’s *Colonial Spectacles: The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931* (2006) examine this phenomenon from the French and Dutch perspectives in Southeast Asia, but these are not exclusive to regional discussions because of the geographical scope of the empires. Elsewhere, attempts to delineate grouped architectural productions may also be found, such as Jon Lim’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Colonial architecture and architects of Georgetown (Penang) and Singapore, between 1786 and 1942* (1990). As records of the ouevre by institutions, Wim Ravesteijn and Jan Kop’s edited volume *For Profit and Prosperity: The Contribution made by Dutch Engineers to Public Works in Indonesia* (2008) has become a necessary reference.

By far the most engaging and critical of expositions on colonial architecture are those that deal with larger landscapes at the colonies themselves, as sites of contestation, construction or negotiation. Khoo Salma Nasution and Abdur-Razzaq Lubis’ *Kinta Valley: Pioneering Malaysia’s Modern Development* (2005), as well as Lim Huck Chin and Fernando Jorge’s *Malacca: Voices from the Street* (2005), both view...
Malaysia’s colonial landscapes from multiple perspectives to claim legitimacy and voice for its various peoples. Gwendolyn Wright’s *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (1991) which discusses Indochina; and Brenda Yeoh’s *Contesting space in colonial Singapore: power relations and the urban built environment* (2003), as well as Anoma Pieris’ *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore’s Plural Society* (2009) cast colonial relations in doubt and give greater agency to emergent communities that become complicit in the building projects.

Nationalism and Country Surveys of Architecture

The contemporary nations of Southeast Asia were formed mainly between the World War II and the long-drawn Cold War that affected the region afterwards. The “post-colonial” period may thus be used as a temporal device to describe the processes disengagement from western colonizers. However, discourses and projects framed in relation to theories of the subaltern studies collective of the same name would not be satisfactory for many reasons. Firstly, the post-colonial discourse propagated by the North Indian literary group, and later complicated by areas studies divisions and politics in Southeast Asia, created new hegemonies when other former colonial countries worldwide were placed within the same discourse as the Indian ones (cf. Minette de Silva and the attempt to dislodge “The Great Tradition”). Secondly, the post-colonial and national periods in Southeast Asia occurred in a relatively short period of time and were immediately entangled in regional Cold War debates, such that multi-site contextualizations become more appropriate than just between metropole and colony. Lastly, the varied regional contexts and voices that resonate between national and global realms make for richer, textured accounting as well as critiques.

Notwithstanding, the period of the 1980s and 1990s witnessed many works to satiate identity placement within the confines and dictates of “nation.” The need to address narratives and histories associated with the nation state resulted in various linear histories even for built environment and architecture. For example, S. Vlatseas’ *A History of Malaysian Architecture* (1980) and Chan Chee Yoong’s *Post-Merdeka Architecture 1957-1987* (1987), and Ken Yeang’s *The Architecture of Malaysia* (1992) each tried either to serialize or link episodes of Malaysia’s history, or told through the efforts of its multi-ethnic peoples, separately to form the narrative. Others sought to recover particular aspects of vernacular houses as important aspects of the national narrative, such as Lim Yee Juan’s *The Malay House: Rediscovering Malaysia’s Indigenous Shelter System* (1987) and Abdul Halim Nasir’s *The Traditional Malay House* (1996, Malay version 1994).

Outside “Malaysia,” a political term that remains entangled in broader regional definitions than the political, the broad canvas of national accounting in architecture led to works like Winand Klassen’s *Architecture in the Philippines: Filipino building in a cross-cultural context* (1986), and Clarence Aasen’s *Architecture of Siam: a cultural history interpretation* (1997). In the late 1990s, the fervour to produce encyclopaedia on social and cultural history gripped Indonesia and Malaysia, with the Indonesian Heritage Project and the Encyclopedia of Malaysia, respectively. Each series had a volume devoted to architecture that was released in 1998, edited by Gunawan Tjahjono (for Indonesia) and Chen Voon Fee (for Malaysia). The production of such lengthy “national” surveys continued recently with Nithi Sthapitanonda’s *Architecture of Thailand: a guide to traditional and contemporary forms* (2005) and the edited volume by Peter Nas titled *The Past in the Present: Architecture in Indonesia* (2006), featuring mainly writers based in Europe.

Beginning this decade, several researchers began to detail and question the state project and involvement in nation building, as also implicit critiques of post-war buildings alongside the transfigurations of modernist architecture. The first was Abidin Kusno’s *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, urban space and political cultures* (2000), a seminal work that dissected colonial and national subjects and subjectivities through discussions of architecture and urban space. This was followed by Gerard Lico’s *Edifice Complex: power, myth and Marcos state architecture* (2003). Two subsequent works showcased the oeuvre possible as states negotiated the networks of global architectures to apply national imagination: Wong Yunn Chii’s *Singapore 1:1: A Gallery of Architecture and Urban Design* (2005 and 2007) as well as Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins’ *Building Cambodia: ‘New Khmer architecture’ 1953-1970* (2006). Such works are invaluable not just as country surveys, but are important contributions to the scarce record of modernist architecture and its attenuations in Southeast Asia. I have attempted to

Urban Studies and Developmental Politics

The important connections between Southeast Asian cities with their respective colonial and national periods have been discussed as early as 1967 in Terry McGee’s The Southeast Asian City: a Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia. McGee demonstrated that colonialism increased the populations in chosen colonial cities exponentially while urbanizing them in the process through imposed western formats. Political elites of the new states of the strident nationalist periods subsequently used the city form to demonstrate and effect social and political change, if these were not built over colonial ones as capital cities. The city thus became the teleological spatial device for both colonialism and nationalism, to control its populations as well as the nation’s political economies. He also made the important claim that Southeast Asian urban areas have existed and may be defined as such since the first century A.D.

Several scholars have noted the frameworks and arguments set forth by McGee and accounted for Southeast Asian cities comparatively in the region, but with colonial and national constructs as backgrounds. These include Dean Forbes’ useful volume titled Asian metropolis: urbanisation and the Southeast Asian city (1996), and Howard Dick and Peter Rimmer’s Cities, Transport and Communications: the Integration of Southeast Asia since 1850 (2003) which examined the networks existing between them over time. Many others have dealt with the spaces resulting from the colonial period but which became problematic during the modernizing and industrializing phases of nationalism in each country. For Malaysia, Lim Heng Kow’s The Evolution of the Urban System in Malaya (1987) was followed by Brookfield, Abdul and Zaharah’s The city in the village: the in-situ urbanization of villages, villagers, and their land around Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1991) to focus on disjunctions between rural landscapes and processes of rapid urbanization. More recent scholarship followed in the vein and scrutinized further reinventions of the nation through development schemes, such as Tim Bunnell’s Malaysia, modernity, and the multimedia super corridor: a critical geography of intelligent landscapes (2004) and Eric Thompson’s Unsettling absences: urbanism in rural Malaysia (2007).

Other types of writing about the cities are emerging, such as Vann Molyvann’s Modern Khmer Cities (2003) written from his position as architect/planner during the Sihanouk period in Cambodia. In the mean time, two architectural and planning practitioners have theorized the future of the Southeast Asian cities through lenses and ameliorations of climate, but with different emphases and concerns: Ken Yeang’s Tropical urban regionalism: building in a South-East Asian city (1987) and Tay Kheng Soon’s Mega-cities in the Tropics: Towards an Architectural Agenda for the Future (1989). Although concentrating mainly on Singapore and Malaysia, the volume edited by Bunnell, Drummond and Ho titled Critical reflections on cities in Southeast Asia (2002) presented scholarship that were similar in framework to McGee’s.

Other writings on planning and developmental studies in Southeast Asia have chosen premises that seemingly place the region in comparative, global spheres. These employ a plethora of statistical and indicative data, to serve as standards to locate and measure Southeast Asian cities against those of the first world. Because the scope of the works is mainly in the contemporary period, the discussions of colonialism and nationalism are less apparent, if not absent. These include Evers and Korff’s Southeast Asian Urbanism: the Meaning and Power of Social Space (2000), as well as Jones and Douglass’s Mega-Urban Regions in Pacific Asia: Urban Dynamics in a Global Era (2008). The works make generalized and unproblematized comparisons of regional cities with examples like New York or London, sometimes without rationalizing principles on which they may be made. The data employed for such works largely equalized conditions and contexts into tables, charts and descriptive comparisons. The criteria for selecting cities for study is sometimes uneven, for example: Jones and Douglass framed the work as Pacific Asia by the addition of Taipei and Shanghai to Bangkok, Manila, Ho Chi Minh City and Jakarta. They serve as useful accounts but seldom discuss the extant urban forms and formations as physical constructs.
Others have begun to contrive the city as text, thereby allowing different types of scholarship into the arena and to move further away from the physical and real. Two edited volumes appeared in 2003, the one by Goh and Yeoh titled *Theorizing the Southeast Asian city as text: urban landscapes, cultural documents, and interpretative experiences* (2003) as well as that of Bishop, Philips and Yeo, titled *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes* (2003). The general editorial argument for these volumes is that such writing broadens views to examine the various cities though not explicitly dealing with their physical forms as understood in the disciplines of urban design and planning. Essays may even transplant post-colonial and other theoretical frameworks for use without deeper intellectual critiques of their appropriateness or problems when these are transferred to a different region. These anthologies usually include one or two works by established researchers examining the Southeast Asian city. Taken as a whole, however, most of the other essays now appear as excess baggage to the urgent need to critique the continually-urbanizing cities, at a crucial time when more fundamental understandings are needed on the table.

**The Comparative Scope**

In the early 1980s, Lim Chong Keat published a paper titled “The International Context for Southeast Asian Architecture” in the volume “Architecture and Identity” proceedings of the regional seminar in the series *Exploring Architecture in Islamic cultures* (1983). While he dealt with expressions of modernist architecture, the paper also highlighted the various vernacular architectures that existed in Southeast Asia, and called for its collective study. Lim had worked with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies based in Singapore, home to 31,000 black and white photographs and 7,000 colour slides of “traditional” houses taken by Dorothy Pelzer in nine Southeast Asian countries. The SEACURP group that included Lim eventually produced *Habitat in Southeast Asia: a pictorial survey of folk architecture* (1987), but Pelzer’s larger research scope at the time of her death in 1972, was carried forward by Roxana Waterson, also a group member. *The Living House: an Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (1990) by Waterson was published in part on that collection became one of the most important texts for such studies crossing the disciplines of Architecture with Anthropology. Several years later, Pinna Indorf, working also in Singapore, produced another important survey project of architectural forms and terminology called the Southeast Asia Traditional Architecture Glossary (SEATAG, 1996).

The efforts in vernacular architecture documentation and its subsequent analysis across the region have not yet enjoyed similar trajectories for other types of architecture. This is because the projects of documentation, though the domain of many researchers of Southeast Asian architecture, are less likely to be placed in institutional archives and for access by other scholars. In that respect, the KALAM project at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia is noteworthy with its emphasis on collecting data, artifacts and measured drawings of the Islamic World around Malaysia, presently numbering about 450 projects. In 1999, Pinna Indorf continued with the visual documentation of approximately twenty shrines of the 8th to the 10th centuries in six countries of South East Asia and their transliterated texts, in the project titled Southeast Asia Corpus (SEACOR, 1999). The discourses of architectural development penned by indigenous scholars in a single volume would emerge two years later, as *Transforming traditions: architecture in the ASEAN countries, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand* (2001). Edited by Jon Lim, it remains the best introduction thus far to architectural histories of the region although the sections were written from the “national” perspective and the evidence of uneven writing and scope for each contributor.

From the mid-1980s onwards, the impulse to conceive documentation and research projects across the Southeast Asian architectural contexts was dealt a challenge from the worldwide wave to explore “Regionalism” and then “Critical Regionalism” in global architectural discourse and contexts, emanating mainly from transatlantic academicians and sources. There began a trend to explore regions in other forms of association, as transfers from Euro-American trajectories following modernist movements and translocations, as well as as safeguards or vanguards of “traditional” identities. The Aga Khan Program was a contributor, creating the journal *Mimar* as well as sponsoring publications such as *Regionalism in architecture: proceedings of the regional seminar* in the series *exploring architecture in Islamic cultures* (1985). These were followed by several others included an edited volume by Robert Powell titled
Regionalism: Forging an Identity (1991). A decade later, several trends of “regionalist consciousness” was corralled by one of the discourse’s originators, now with the discourse of the “tropics” drawn under the umbrella, when Tzonis, Lefaivre and Stagno edited a volume called Tropical Regionalism: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalisation (2001) as a result of a conference discussing tropical architecture in third world countries.

Conclusions
As scholars like O.W. Wolters, Paul Wheatley, Anthony Reid, Benedict Anderson, and Victor Lieberman have demonstrated, there are scopes for the study of Southeast Asia as a body that is intrinsically valuable, either as specific locations but also collectively acknowledged as a region. This essay is an attempt to trace its spatial histories and to argue for the continued viability of such a research position. It does not serve to be exclusionary to extra-regional fields or scopes: indeed, the histories of the region have shown that it cannot possibly be so. The regional project is still tenable for the following reasons:

Recent scholarship has used the nation as a frame for conducting and producing academic work: this is increasingly so with younger scholars who have not experienced political forms other than the nation or nation-state. The placement of “nation” amongst other Southeast Asian ones immediately reveals other problems of “national scholarship” and alerts us to many other contexts for subject matter. I have argued elsewhere that, extending from Anderson’s comparative spectres between metropole and colony, the present-day Southeast Asian nations have created secondary spectres between themselves due to the uneven and different natures of the colonial ones which were built upon by local elites. Southeast Asia must be cited comparatively if global or first world platforms for analysis are used to rate the cities, architecture or their landscapes. The presence of the region thus broadens the scope of “nation” to reduce the introspective local gaze on the one hand, but on the other also broaden studies without being drawn too quickly into simple, international comparison.

Secondly, the number of scholars working on Southeast Asian topics has noticeably increased in the past two decades, and their work is finding resonance with or is blazing the trails in various fields. This means that theoretical frameworks and premises based on these scholars’ work may be used for future work instead of over-reliance on those which must be drawn in because of its perceived lack. In working at specific locations and across the region, the chances of creating a resolution between the emic-etic or that between depth and breadth, are higher. Lastly, the works of Kusno, McGee and others have shown that both the “colonial” and “national” are important categories and lenses that enrich discourse on space in Southeast Asia.

The cited texts in this essay and the various frameworks have, hopefully, discussed a way to reckon and deal with the large body of literature produced for discussing spatial forms in Southeast Asia. As may be recognised, much more academic work is required before a better understanding of the various frameworks may be realized. Part of the work is in the provision of translations for the researchers working in different languages, especially the works straddle across different former-colonies. There is still a lack of a periodic platformas for scholars to discuss and critique each others’ work, as journals and conferences. In that respect, the Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture started in 1995 as an annual publication is a good space for scholarly writing and empirical documentation. There are various centres for the study of Southeast Asia both in the region and outside it, but collaborations between them are still few and far in between. If there may be a way to forge these various possibilities in future, our understandings of spatial histories of this region will increase.

References


Powell, Robert, ed., Regionalism: Forging an Identity. Singapore: School of Architecture, NUS.


