

Chee Tong Temple, Singapore

A Transformative Approach to the Design of a Chinese Temple



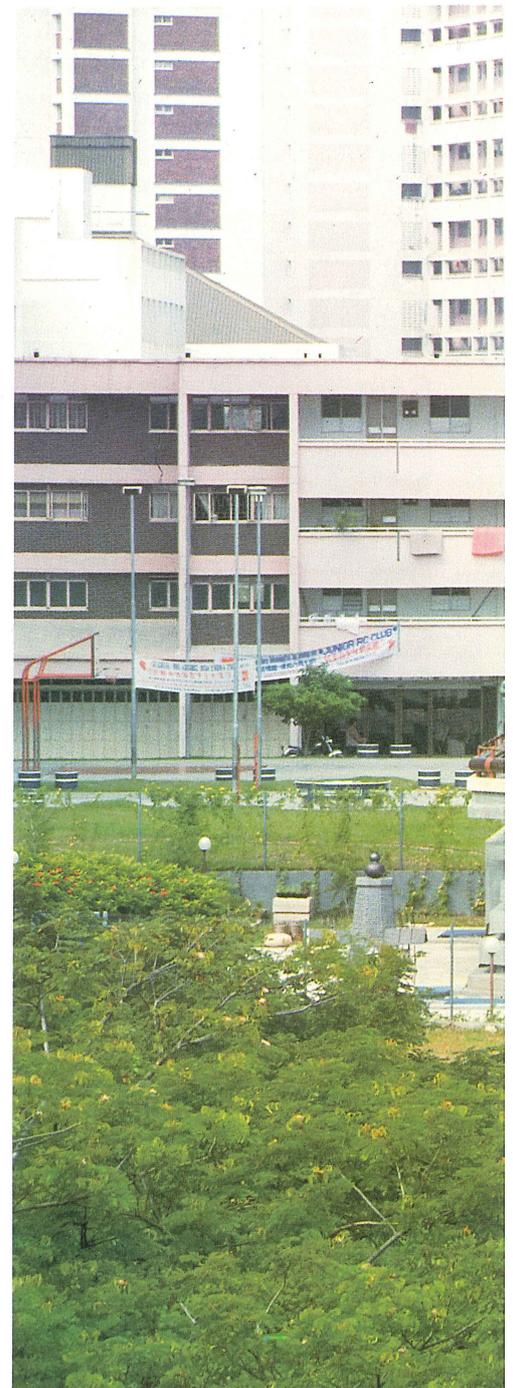
Project Data

Client: Chee Tong Temple.
Architect: Akitek Tenggara.
Date of conception: 1983.
Completion: 1987.
Site area: 1,640 square metres.
Built area: 482 square metres.
Cost: S\$1.5 million.

The Chee Tong Temple is typical of the many overseas Chinese temples which cater to the spiritual and community needs of overseas Chinese. The Chinese of Singapore come mainly from small towns and villages of the southern provinces of Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Chaozhou and Fujian. The religion of the ordinary people from such places was more Taoist than Buddhist or Confucianist. Taoism with its naturalism and stress on divination had a strong appeal. The temples therefore provided spiritual and psychological comfort in facing the uncertainties and privations of life in feudal China and overseas. Basically the temples which came with the migrants were therefore Taoist with a syncretism of Buddhist and Confucianist elements. As a social/religious institution they are remarkable in that while they lack a central orthodoxy, they have been able to exist for over 4,000 years virtually intact. This is because the religious ideas are so deeply rooted in the Chinese world view and are an active part of their daily lives.

Temples are truly democratic institutions in that they arise and are sustained from the direct initiatives of ordinary people who feel the need to establish and maintain a temple. There is no priesthood or paid clergy. Typically a group would form a board of trustees, build a temple and organise its functions all on its own. They may establish a large fraternity of kindered temples but they are each autonomous. Through the years, they renew themselves by co-option of new members into the trusteeship — through a consensual process. A group of disciples or adherents revolve around the trustees and volunteer their services to the temple freely. The extent of devotion and volunteerism is impressive in the Chee Tong Temple.

In the syncretic Chinese religion the supreme deity and a pantheon of other deities intercede in natural and human affairs. The Chinese believe in an activist role in relation to the fates. They are not prone to passive acceptance of fate or fortune. Chinese religion is therefore the institution and the process through which the individuals modify, appease or anticipate what happens to them. In the Chee Tong Temple, the particular deity is Wang Lau Sian Ser, a Bodhisattva or Avatar figure who is believed to be a historical personage known to have per-



formed extraordinary deeds in ancient times and who now returns in deity form to aid mankind and intercede on its behalf. The Chee Tong Temple provides consultation between the devotees and the deity through the medium while in a trance.

When the Temple trustees decided to appoint architects for their new temple in early 1983, they read in the newspaper that a young graduate architect Ho Kwancjan had designed a modern Buddhist temple for his final-year design thesis at the local School of Architecture.

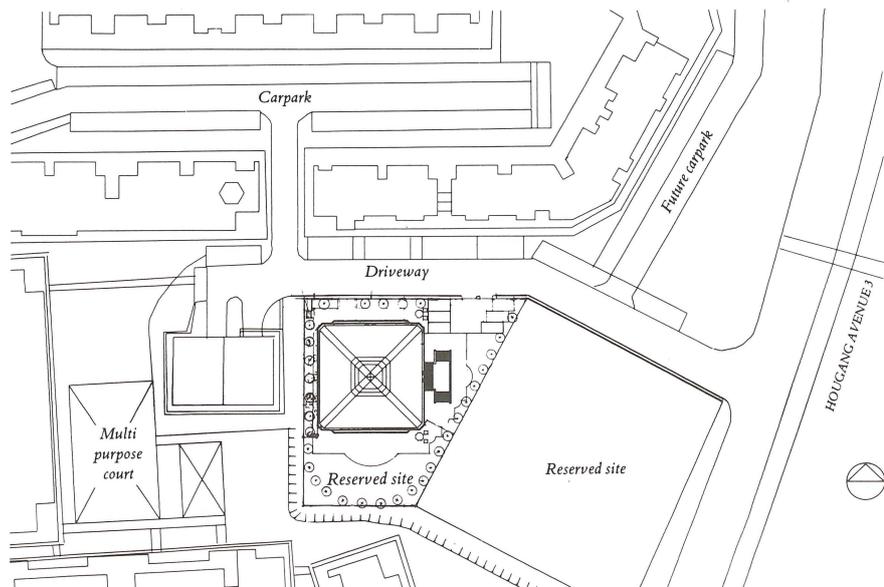
*Text, photographs
and plans by
Tay Kheng Soon.*

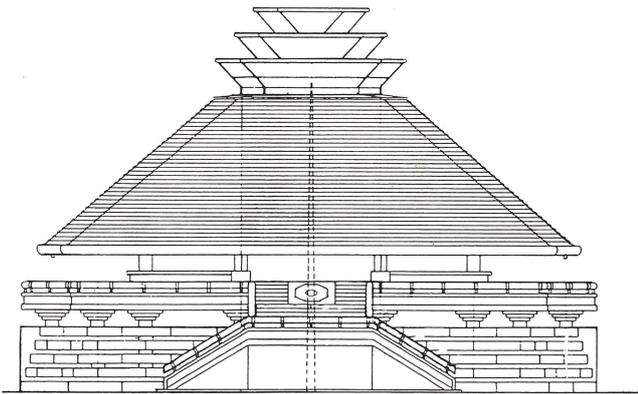


Above: General view of the Chee Tong Temple in its urban context. East facade.

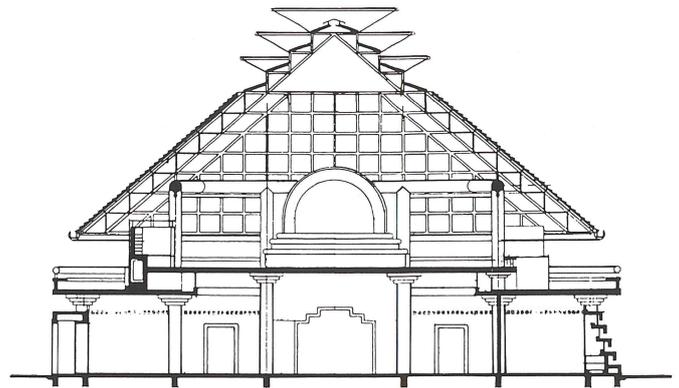
Right: Site plan of the temple, showing the difficult size and shape of the plot, located amid high-rise flats and parking lots.

They learnt later that he was now attached to Akitek Tenggara. They saw this as a propitious sign. They invited Akitek Tenggara to be interviewed together with a number of other architects they were considering. At the interview they were surprised that we were not prepared to approach the design of

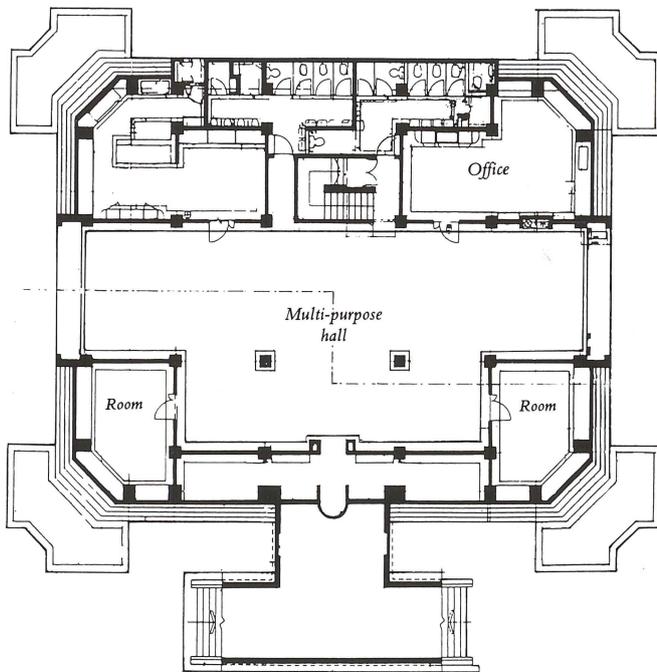




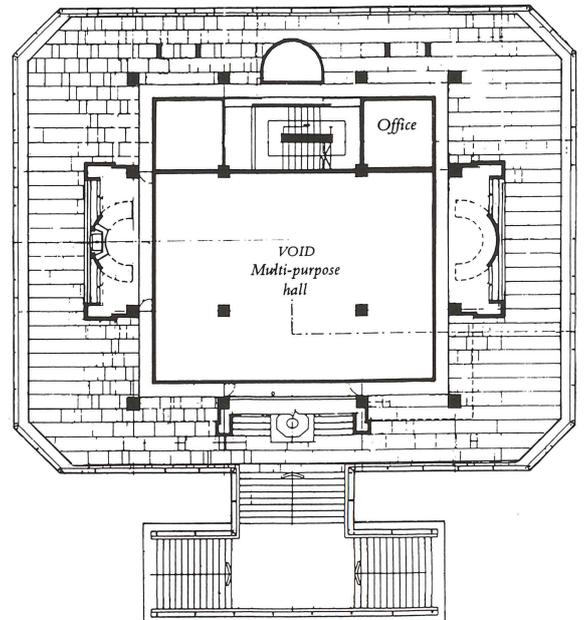
Front elevation



Section



First storey

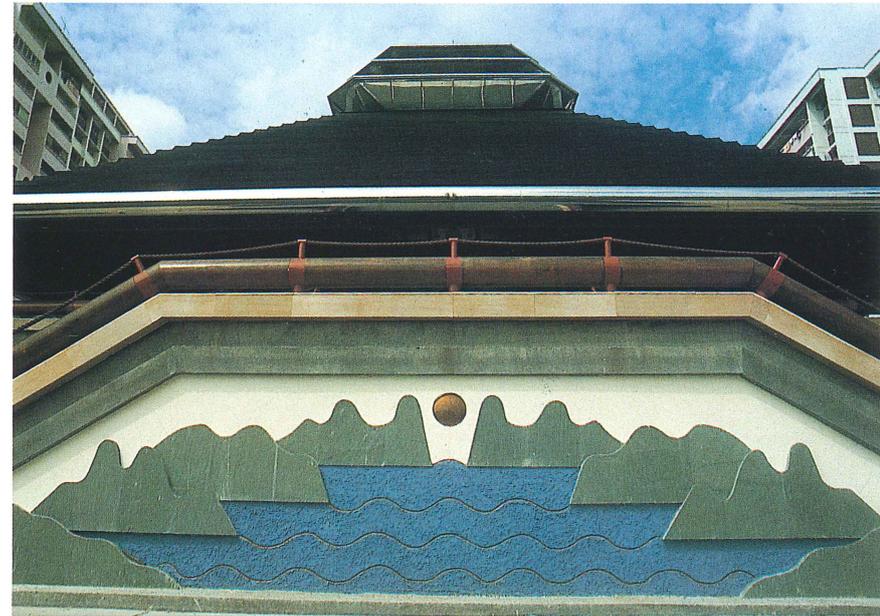


Second storey

the proposed temple along traditional stylistic lines but wished to interpret the design in contemporary terms. This surprised and impressed the Temple Committee which consisted of young professionals and businessmen. They were not adverse to the idea but requested us to consult "the Master".

At that time we did not know who "the Master" was. We assumed that he was a senior member of the Committee. On the appointed day and time, we went to the existing Temple which was temporarily accommodated in a converted house. We were introduced to a Medium who was in a trance. The Medium was a middle-age lady but whilst in trance spoke in an ancient Chinese man's voice. This was interpreted by a member of the Trustees. We communicated through this person. Several such sessions took place in which our design philosophy for the Temple was discussed. During the early stages, the shape of the roof and the choice of materials was queried and explained. The Medium agreed to the contemporary approach in the design acceding to the idea that the religion had to be made contemporary in response to contemporary situations. The Temple should be bright and airy. The Medium stated that the roof should not have sharp edges to point at surrounding buildings in deference to neighbours. We were afraid that this meant having to be forced to have upturned eaves. We decided to chamfer the pyramidal roof of the original design, thus creating an octagonal roof plan instead. This was agreed. Various numbers were insisted on. The building had to have three levels which we interpreted as three distinct level changes rather than three-storeys. The Committee had thought that "the Master" required three-storeys earlier. We were concerned that this would create an unsatisfactory scale relationship between the building and the surroundings. We were happy that "the Master" agreed to our interpretation of three levels.

In wishing to achieve a bright and airy quality to the worship space, we proposed a system of mirrors mounted on the rooftop to reflect light into the altar area and to reflect the flickering candlelights out through the roof at night. Though we conceived the mirrors as optical devices, we were pleased that all those who go to the Temple describe it as "a glass lotus" — an interpretation which resonates with their own internalised iconography.



Throughout the design the artistic problem was how to maintain a balance and an aesthetic integrity without inclining towards the traditional iconography nor falling back on functional expressionism and industrial forms. This became increasingly difficult as we move down the scale from the architectural frame towards the furniture and fittings and decorations. The actual worship paraphernalia became extremely difficult to modify as each specific item was so deeply embedded in an ancient system of symbols and signs. To undertake a re-interpretation of the design of these items would involve a total review of the iconography of the Chinese religious and cultural edifice. It is a task beyond us. We

Top: Detail of sculpted decorative mural on the main entry stairs.

Above: Entry steps and view into the central roof with skylight for daytime natural lighting.

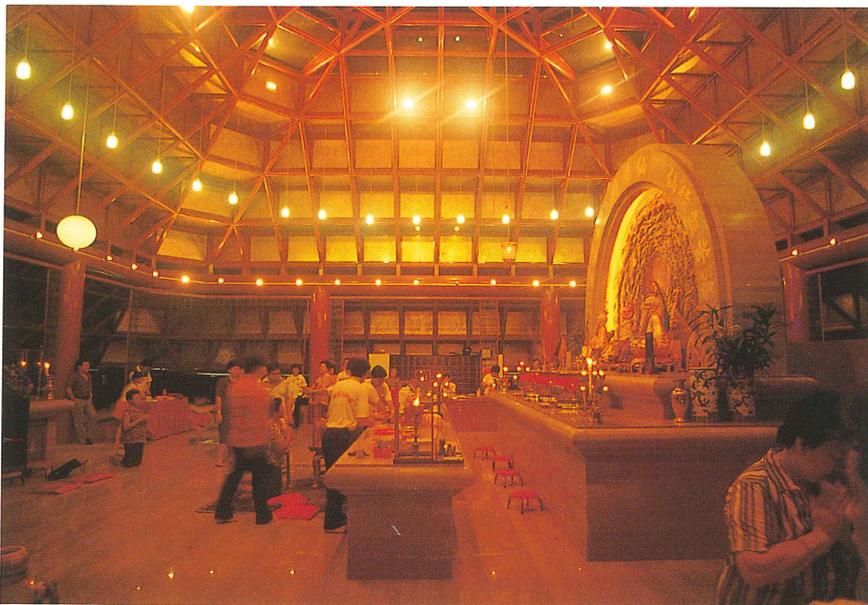
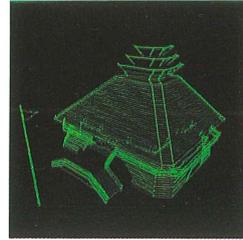
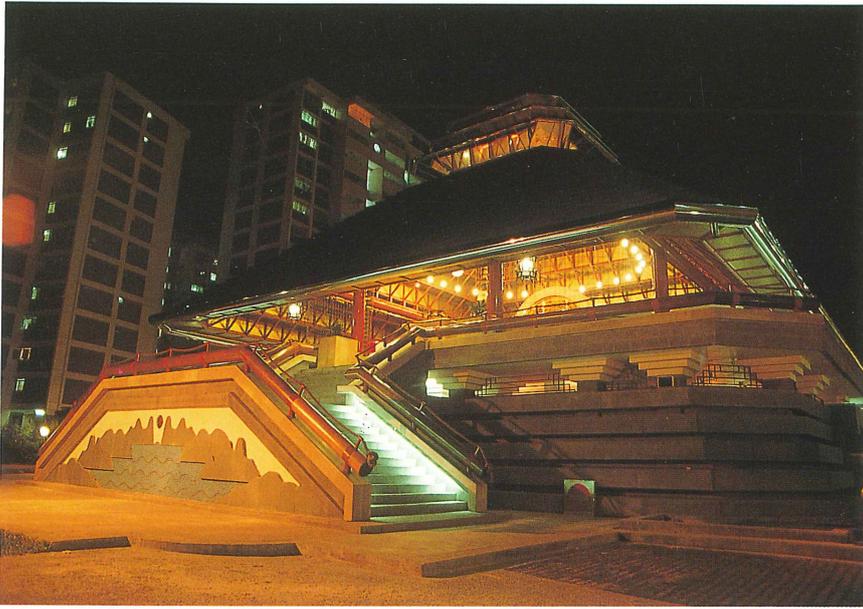
were however surprised at the willingness of the Trustees to attempt such a renovation. This indicates to us the extraordinary confidence and internal strength of the Chinese religious world view as held by this particular group of Chinese religionists.

The Temple was completed in 1987 and officially opened by a ceremony attended by approximately 5,000 persons. Patrick Chia and myself worked on the final stages of the design and completion whereas Ho Kwongjan was involved in





*Top: Entrance stairs to the prayer hall on the second storey.
Above: Detail of the temple interior with the altar and sculptures of deities.
Preceding pages: Overall view of the temple at night.*



the early stages. We were all entirely surprised at the natural reception the new design elicited from both the Chinese and English language press and the devotees. The design seems to have touched some deep common chord of consciousness. It confirms that architecture can be made to respond to deeper imperatives than those obvious and literally representative stylistic motifs used as convenient signs and symbols of identity in pastiche manner.

During the process of conceiving and realising the project, we have reinforced our belief that at the deep structure level of human consciousness there are common chords which can be addressed in design. We believe that religion and other spiritual systems are various manifestations of that deep structure. As designers,

*Top: General view of the temple at night.
Above: Interior of the temple during an evening service. The metallic roof structure is particularly apparent.
Far right: Computer-based axonometric drawing of the temple.*

we feel that we can better attend to the urgings that lie at the core of human consciousness when we maintained our artistic autonomy, from the various philosophical or ideological formulations which constitute a particular religion. We accept that the measure of the integrity of a design in artistic terms is the faithfulness with which the immanent order embedded in the deep structure of consciousness is expressed. In religious buildings this is most telling.

Tay Kheng Soon graduated from the Singapore Polytechnic in 1964 and has been in private practice since. His work is mainly centred in South-East Asia. Besides practice, he takes an active interest in architectural education and has conducted a number of design workshops and teaching assignments at the National University of Singapore, School of Architecture. In 1986 he was visiting scholar under the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard/MIT.

