

---

# The International Context for South East Asian Architecture

*Lim Chong Keat*

---

## The Question of Identity

I am glad this conference is focussing on the search for architectural identity rather than a search for National identity. Debates on nationalism recur continually on many subjects — dress, behaviour, art, dance, culture, etc. — and tend to be divisive rather than ‘adhesive’ or persuasive. My view has always been that culture has no boundaries. Despite bureaucratic desires, prescribed forms of constraints stultify rather than inspire.

The question of identity is really something you can rhapsodise over and turn inside out, but I think we should look at it with a different perspective — my paper is presented in three sections. International Buildings, Regional Projects, and the Tribal Habitat

of South East Asia — followed by an epilogue, a tribute to the late Buckminster Fuller, who had a world-view of South East Asia.

---

## International Architecture

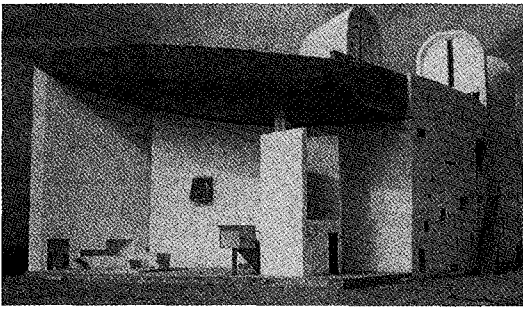
The first of my slides is of Falling Water. Frank Lloyd Wright has written significantly on the search for style (his concept of identity) rather than for a style. He abhorred the plagiarists, whom he called the “stencilists”, and those who purvey fashion and stylisms.

The currency of “isms” — modernism, ultra-modernism, and now post-modernism, plagues us. In South East Asia, where often a feudal condition

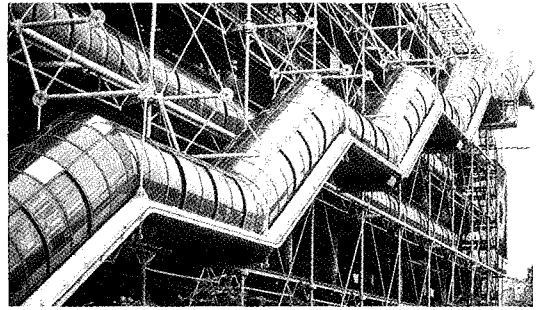
---



*Falling Water at Bear Run by Frank Lloyd Wright*



*Ronchamp Chapel by Le Corbusier — a great piece of sculpture not to be copied.*



*The Pompidou Centre, Paris*

still prevails, the concept of modernity — and the relevant value system of the modern movement — have been insufficiently understood or appreciated.

Pop trends are by nature transient and flippant, and even if they have definable identity, they will become dated. If we prefer and look for more lasting (or even classical) qualities in architecture, then our concept of identity or style will need a firmer basis.

Most of you have your own perceptions of international buildings. Some perceptions will be amplified by what you read; often written by the authors of the buildings who will explain them and some of you have read second generation interpretations of the buildings, others will have heard these buildings talked about by teachers in schools. Every building, therefore, doesn't exist only for its own physical identity, it becomes a vehicle for journalists and teachers which affects our perception.

Another of Wright's buildings — the Johnson Wax Factory reminds me that one of the tasks assigned to us, by society and certainly by our parents was to go overseas and learn about the world. We come from different backgrounds, some more traditional than others and it was our job to go abroad, to know the world, to understand the world and to learn from it the good things. In the process of course many of us realised that we learned much about the Western world and so little of the rest including our own world.

Many of the important international buildings were built over two generations ago and I have visited and evaluated them. Direct experiences are essential and quite different from second-hand impressions from books or magazines; the latter could even be deleterious especially when inflamed by trendy critics, such is the power of the media in establishing ingroups and cults.

A building that is the subject of pilgrimages or certainly was in my time as a student and which we all tried to see first hand was Le Corbusier's Ron-

champ — a striking and romantic building — a great piece of sculpture (not to be copied). Corbusier wasn't only a romantic artist, he thought of himself as a great social reformer, planning for people. This took the form of his *Unité d'Habitation* and later in India a building in Ahmedabad for the mill owners and his huge buildings for the Secretariat at Chandigarh. Le Corbusier was of course such a powerful artist that he influenced all schools and shoals of lesser architects who try to emulate him.

The Yoyogi stadium in Tokyo by Kenzo Tange excites me — a great work of architecture harnessing technical skills and the source of enormous national pride — a symbol for the Olympic Games held in Japan. His work is complimented with the Tokyo Festival Hall by Kunio Maekawa undoubtedly one of Japan's great modern architects integrating Japanese characteristics.

The influence of buildings by Paul Rudolf who aspired to the mantle of Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Moshe Safdie, I.M. Pei and John Portman can be seen all over the world sometimes in appreciation or flattery, sometimes in travesty. Their impact through glossy magazines are perhaps even greater than "in the flesh". Architectural students in their adolescence naturally try on the new architectural "clothes" for size — and dream of greater virtuosity to rival and outdo acclaimed masterpieces with their every scheme and output. The mature architect has to sort all this out — from eclecticism to a personal integrity.

Equally so the Pompidou Centre in Paris which contrasts so sharply with the older buildings around and Norman Foster's new masterpiece for the Hong-kong Shanghai Bank will influence many people who will try to do surrogate versions.

---

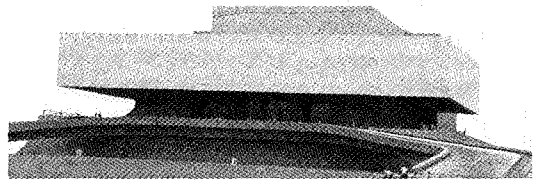
### Regional Architecture

Turning to the work of our contemporaries in South

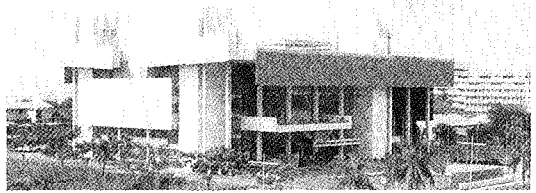
East Asia, Locsin's monumental, expressionist building in Manila was for a client who wanted something in a new imperial style — who is to say that it hasn't got identity? Similarly with Sumet Jumsai's earlier brute concrete works in Bangkok and the work of Atelier-6 in Jakarta and Bali.

Some of the work of my own practice in Singapore and Malaysia, will lead me to my next point. The Singapore Conference Hall, Seremban State Mosque, Jurong Town Hall and KOMTAR in Penang illustrate an unself-conscious international design criteria which underlies the work of many Southeast Asian architects.

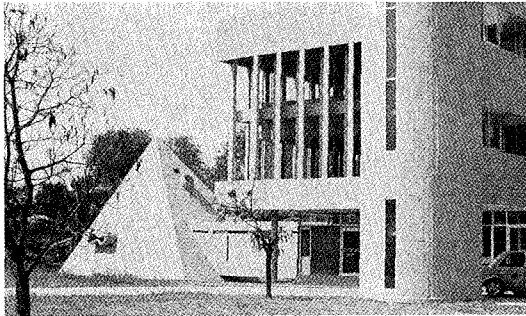
Their "tropically" sometimes do not eschew air-conditioning. Frequently clients and suppliers are part of an internationally trading world. Their national importance lie in the fact that their architects are nationals in residence, serious about their



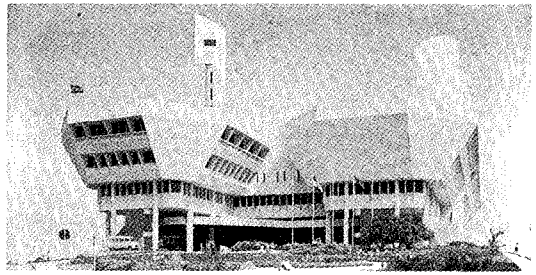
*C.C.P. Manila Monumental expressionist architecture by Locsin*



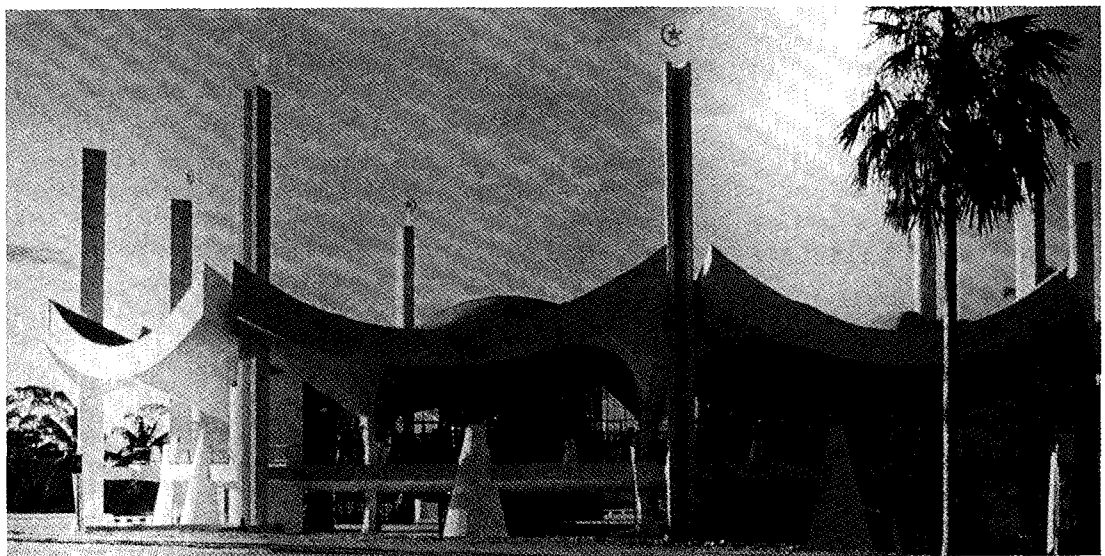
*Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House.*



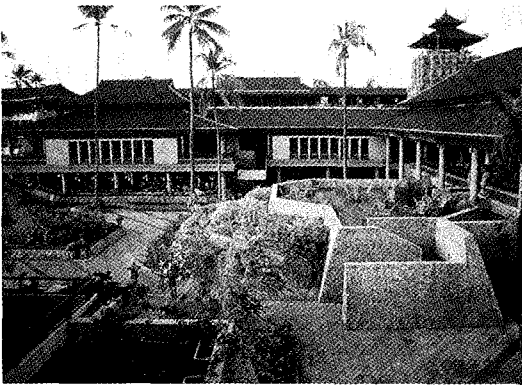
*Brute concrete work in Bangkok by Sumet Jumsai*



*Jurong Town Hall*



*Seremban State Mosque — an unself-conscious international design criteria underlies the work of the South East Asian architects.*



*Nusa Dua Hotel, Bali*



*The now-vanished headhouses of the Bidayuh, Borneo*

urban responsibilities and are not transient foreigners. Generally, the major regional practitioners have come to terms with world building techniques, and by training and experience, have been ready to design more significant projects not only in their own cities but also in other parts of the world.

Upstaging this prospect, commercial and other interests have brought in the big “brand names” of architecture to achieve prestige faster than the region can originate. With the Peis and the Portmans, a new kind of competitiveness results. Perhaps by way of reaction, we can observe a swing towards facade pastiche, historicism, vernacularism or symbolic “nationalism.” With projects like the Tanjong Jara Hotel, we have folk building craft borrowed authentically and applied, with functional contradictions and conflicts. In the Nusa Dua Hotel, the designers have recreated a nouveau riche Balinese palace — far beyond traditional antecedents — and suitably opulent for touristic royalty, the result is fantastic, a tribute not only to Balinese craftsmanship but also to hotel showmanship.

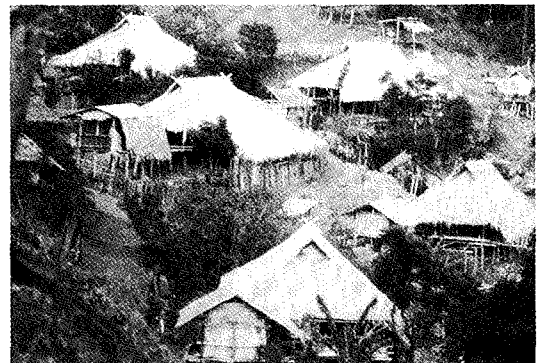
Notwithstanding all this excitement, I feel we should not forget the relevant mainstream traditions and principles of the modern movement in architecture. Beyond stylistic identity, the real question is whether the design solutions are good or bad — in terms of these principles and in professional competence.

---

### **Tribal Traditions in South East Asia**

As an abrupt change, I wish to illustrate indigenous tribal cultures still extant in the region, in some cases proudly primitive and others woefully battered by the impact of “modernisation”.

Currently, I am involved in collating photographic information on these cultures for an exhibition to be

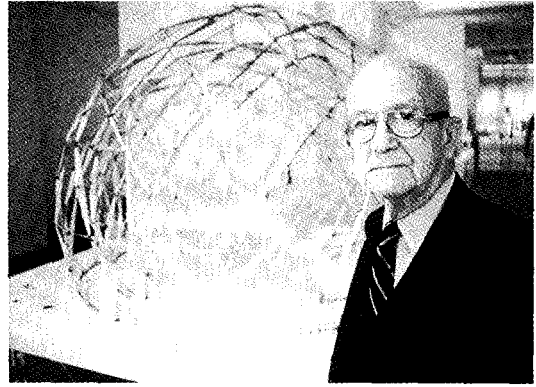


*Akha dwellings in North Thailand.*

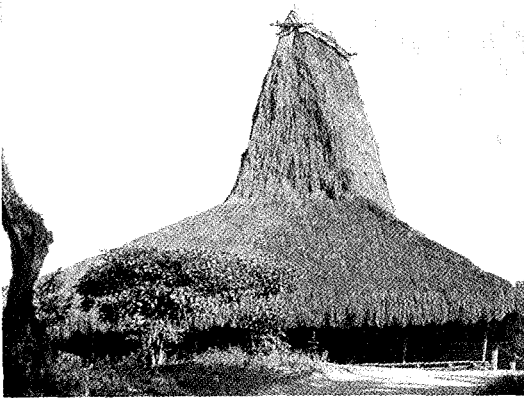
called Traditional Habitat in South East Asia (commissioned by the National Art Gallery, KL), which will help in presenting an overview of the tribal cultures which underlay and transcend latter-day national boundaries, and which circumscribes the region (which I call the Sunda Girdle).

In some cases, even architects in the same area are unaware of the indigenous (or earlier migratory) tribal cultures. The attitude and policy of government towards these minority groups have often been ambivalent. In some cases, the indigenous forms (especially roofs and decorative features) are seen as appropriate national motifs for applied revivalism (usually out of context) or for touristic appeal — local flavour.

There is a commonality of tradition, throughout the region in a great belt that sweeps up to Japan with tribal differences as people relate to the environment. This can be illustrated with the longhouses of the Iban and Kayan and the now-vanished headhouses of the Bidayuh, Akha dwellings in North Thailand, the habitat of the Bontoc and Ifugao



*Buckminster Fuller He saw South East Asia as the "atoll" cradle for Early Man and symbolically linked the three-way weave basketry found in the region to other conceptual strands in his world view*



*The Neolithic villages in Sumba*

"Human Integrity is the uncompromising courage of self determining whether or not to take initiatives, support or cooperate with others in accord with 'all the truth and nothing but the truth' as it is conceived by the divine mind always available in each individual.

Whether humanity is to continue and comprehensively prosper on Spaceship Earth depends entirely on the integrity of the human individuals and not on the political and economic systems. The Cosmic question has been asked — 'Are humans a worthwhile-to-universe invention?' "

tribes, and neolithic villages in Sumba-Indonesia.

To me, the more important objective is to document and appreciate the cultures for their own sake. Before we can think of solutions in the modernising process, we must survey the residual condition and research the historical background of these truly indigenous regional cultures — to appraise and to help, rather than to derive from.

*All photographs courtesy of Lim Chong Keat.*

### **Buckminster Fuller**

Bucky in his later years had an increasing fascination and love for South East Asia. He saw it as the "atoll" cradle for Early Man; and he symbolically linked the 3-way weave basketry found in the region to other conceptual strands in his world view.

Bucky reminds us of our comprehensive global design responsibilities, beyond national or regional divisiveness, and beyond conventional architecture to the inexorable integrity of human science and art I end by quoting him: