
Case Study 1 — Malaysia

Unity of Culture and Knowledge in the Unity of Design

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South-East Asia is going through a rapid transformation of the built environment because of the rapid development, prosperity and stability of the region. As such, what should we, as architects, do, what kind of direction should we take in order to arrive at a formula whereby we could direct architecture in relation to architectural identity in South East Asia?

This question brings another one to mind, are we afraid of the rapid development of external influences, or of inter-connection within the South East Asia region? The answer ought to be that we should not be afraid of any kind of interaction or influences, or rapid development, come what may — be it the electronic, the agricultural, or economic revolutions.

We should approach them in the most logical manner, by arriving at unity of culture and knowledge as a basic and unifying force. Here I would like to define what I mean by culture and unity.

Culture is the activity, or manifestation of the mind. It is synonymous to life, so the more cultured we are, the more culture will be our manifestation of life. It could be in the form of literature, art or philosophy. It is a personal expression of the mind. So when you say a person is cultured, or a group of people has this culture, they would share a kind of common attitude and display it consciously or unconsciously. In Malaysia, there is the culture of the Chinese, the Malays, the Indians — it could be any race. Therefore the reference is not to refinement, because refinement is not culture. It's the polish, the veneer, it is external.

Unity should not be taken in the sense that you lump it all together. No, it is unity in the sense that it should consist of opposite ends that complement one another. There should be balance, there should be tolerance and freedom, there should be movement, and there should be change and dynamism. It is not unity in the sense that it is static. Take the analogy of the unity in nature — for instance, rain. Rain, where it falls on the earth brings to life the corn or the vegetables. The earth bears fruits. Then the cows feed off

the crops, and produce milk, and so on. So you see the unity in creation. It is balance. Therefore unity is really the balance of opposite ends. In the Malaysian context of deciding whether to adopt certain shapes be it a Minangkabau roof or whatever other question that we face we should be careful of being too restricted. That would be a very stunted and un-Islamic kind of approach because it discourages the growth of any kind of manifestations on our part. Unity should grow, should change.

How then do we arrive at a kind of unity of knowledge, of culture, of all the manifestations that we have into one unity of design so that we could arrive at the unity of mankind, unity of many things? Unity is the growth of many combinations of design which cannot be identified as Indian, Malay, Chinese or Colonial. For instance what we would say is a colonial house, is actually a Malay kampong house translated into bricks and mortar by the British who really understood the essence of the indigenous dwelling place.

To illustrate a combination of design, which would make up unity, we must take factors that comprise the essence, or deeper structure, of unity — for instance balance. Jot these factors down from one to ten and taking the analogy of numbers pick a combination of numbers and you have a quantity. In the same way, the elements or the essence of unity: balance, harmony, culture, and design combine together to give a solution — an identity, and just as there are lots of combinations of numbers there could be variety within identity. Then, this unity framework should have a set of rules: that there should be no suppression, there should be tolerance. There should be balance in the total system, like, when the rain comes down in the river it would not be flooded, it would just go to the sea. This is the balance of nature.

So when we have established all these, balance and unity, knowledge, culture, all within this framework then given the threat of the economic revolution or the space age or whatever it is, we could relate to and design within that framework.