

The West Pacific Region versus Punk Architecture

A number of architects in the West Pacific region have been concerned for sometime with the problem of Asian identity in architecture, a concern brought about by successive waves of cultural invasion from the West beginning with the Colonial Period and more recently with the Modern and Post-Modern movement, the latter especially in its more extreme and dominant streak of Free Style Classicism, or what I call Punk Architecture.

I want briefly to touch upon Post Modernism because, whatever we may say about it, it has become a veritable movement even in our part of the world. (Here I do not wish to refer to the several condominiums being built in Bangkok and elsewhere, with giant GRC Corinthian and other pastiche orders cribbed straight out from Sir Bannister Fletcher's catalogue.) Like Mannerism, Post Modernism has created many useful grammars and has, in this generation, become a pep-pill to make even the most timid of architects brave in design. With this new licence, it is suddenly possible and easy to design almost anything.

Perhaps even too easy! Which explains why Post Modernism has become a refuge for people who cannot design or whose business is, indeed, *not* in buildable design. More serious a problem is the complete alienation to society of Punk Architecture, the movement's dominant off-shoot, whereby "architecture" can only be found almost exclusively in architectural-cum-Punk fashion magazines. The 'hero' in this is Frank Gehry, who is currently "deconstructing three or four multi-million dollar houses, ripping away their classical pediments, driving odd-shaped rectangles at a skew to their spatial grids: generally destroying their equilibrium ..." "Ugly is beautiful" is one thing, but when people start slashing and throwing acid at the Mona Lisa we have to ask seriously whether that is art. This, at any rate, is nearly the state of the art in the West.

Even without the Punk punch, I cannot help feeling that it is downright irrelevant for Asian architects to be led into the Westerner's game of constructing, or "deconstructing", elements which are drawn purely from the European civilisation. Besides, it is an introverted and selfish game relevant only (and even this is now questionable) to the Western cultural scene.

It might be asked what would happen

if we adopt this "selfish" attitude so that each of us play out *our own* respective game: Willy Lim with his Chinese Post Modernism (without the Punk punch). By the same token, it must be supposed that there will be Balinese, Indian and Malaysian Post Modernism.

Would the above scenario, if pursued to the limit, constitute an enrichment of world culture or a total break-down in inter-cultural report? Should we play out this game for the rest of this century? At least that would satisfy our Asian identity, and, leaving out the Punk punch, our politicians' belated nationalistic aspirations.

At this point it seems appropriate to examine the situation in the region and the question of "Asian identity". As inferred above, Asia is so diverse in culture that its identity must necessarily be in the plural. To construct a meaningful scenario, it will be necessary first to consider all the Asian cultural mainstreams.

In this region — and I am now thinking particularly of Southeast Asia as a focal point — two cultural mainstreams have always been easily recognised, Indian and Chinese, together with the amalgam of the two in mainland Southeast Asia, which has correctly led to the term "Indochina". Nevertheless, something is amiss in the overall picture. In my diagram showing the cultural mainstreams I have therefore added another. This is the West Pacific or Austronesian culture which I will now explain.

Figure 1 shows the geographical spread of Austronesian culture. The area embraces island and mainland Southeast Asia, the southern part of China, and Japan. The principal common denominators are: 1) rice agriculture, 2) three-way basketry, and 3) the house on stilts. Cultural cross-currents and back-eddies

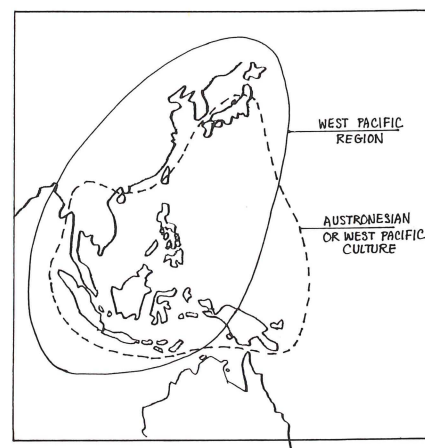


Figure 1 — the geographical spread of Austronesian culture.

Text and illustrations by
Sumet Jumsai
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tend to spread and blur these traits beyond clearly defined boundaries so that the two former characteristics are to be found pretty well everywhere in Asia east of the Arabian Sea. There remains the architectural characteristics of the house on stilts, which is still unique to the West Pacific region.

The three cultural mainstreams, Chinese, Indian and Austronesian, can now be plotted together in a chart with the time element to show the different stages of inter-cultural infusion from, say, 10,000 BC to the 21st century. In this chart (Figure 2), Japanese culture is seen as a branch of Austronesian culture, although it became impregnated with Chinese civilisation. Southeast Asia, on the other hand, is shown as a direct successor to this culture, although in turn it was penetrated by both Chinese and Indian civilisations.

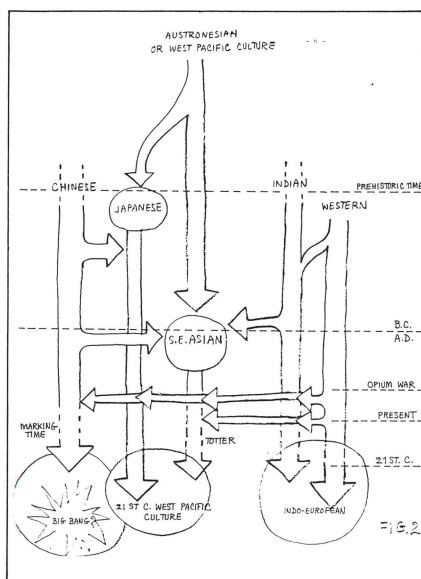
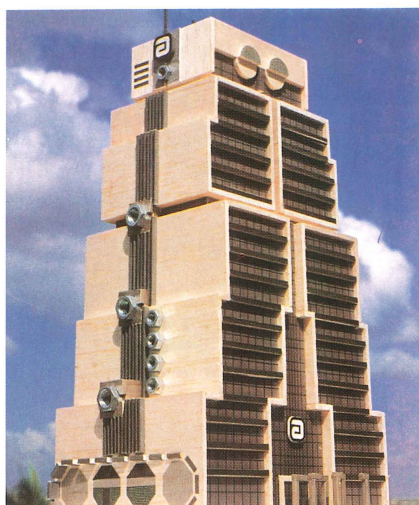


Figure 2 — Stages of inter-cultural infusion.

Besides these, is shown another column to represent Western civilisation, whose cultural style and ideology have left almost no stone unturned in Asia from the 19th century onwards.

With the emergence of the above cultural mainstreams into the 21st century, I would prognosticate the following scenarios:

- India's progression will continue to be within the old Indo-European scenario.
- China will be marking time in terms of new architecture until well into the next century, when her dormant cultural strength and original thinking might once more sweep the world. The period will, undoubtedly, coincide with



Model, Bank of Asia Building, Bangkok, by S. Jumsai.

a new economic strength in China.

- The West Pacific region, led by the Japanese branch of the Austronesian group, will be forging ahead creatively into the 21st century, followed by the Austronesian main line; Southeast Asia. Although a number of Japanese architects play along with Free Style Classicism, I feel that it is merely "international relations". Behind the game there is something definitely original and creative. (Many still say the Japanese are derivative, however I discount that.) I would venture to say even that original architectural expression is now to be found in Japan and no longer in Europe or America.

The position of Southeast Asia is not any less interesting. This Austronesian mainstream, having long ago digested both Chinese and Indian culture, and now tackling Western culture with gusto, is the richer in experience.

In Figure 2 I have shown Japan and Southeast Asia together in the 21st century as a loosely grouped Austronesian entity. With architecture in the West reaching a cultural *cul-de-sac*, as evidenced by its Punk style and its philosophy, our architecture must now bypass the Western intellectual impasse to enter the 21st century. Naturally, architects in every age proclaim either crisis or birth of an epoch. But in our present dilemma there is no getting away from the fact that contemporary architecture is convoluting: it is in its final stage of self-destruction. A Big Bang will follow the present cultural Black Hole, and a new era will emerge, and when that happens I feel that the lead role will be played by the Austronesian group.

Sumet Jumsai is a leading architect in private practice in South East Asia. He is also an author of many articles and forthcoming books on the region.