INTRODUCTION / BY SOO CHAN

It is always a difficult proposition to begin to write about the process that goes on in the making of one's own architecture. To do so requires sustained introspection and ability to be open. The process of design by its very nature is fluid and is always evolving. What is constant is the recurring organizational strategies that manifest themselves in different forms to address the given brief in a particular site. The objective in writing this essay is to discover the common threads fundamental to the works in this monograph. In the process, a dozen houses are analyzed and it becomes evident that there is an empirical spatial and organizational strategy behind all the projects. The works are typologically driven and the spaces are classical in spirit.

To understand one's own architecture requires an understanding of self. We are a product of the sum of all our experiences and this is true of my architecture as well. The influence of my training in the early 1980s and coming into contact with my influential mentors played a big part in my own development as an architect. At Yale, I remember Rob Krier's passion for architecture as he recounted over beers at the campus pub the number of competitions he did not win. Robert Venturi talked about the fact that it was always the small things that kept him awake all night. It was the early 1980s, a time when architecture was very inclusive. I recall students aligning themselves with different camps: the Post Modern historist, the Neo-rationalist, the Orthodox classicist, etc. Many spontaneous discussions took place at the sixth floor review pit at Paul Rudolf's Art and Architecture building late into the evenings.

I remember my early grounding in design under a particularly inspirational teacher by the name of Leslie Laskey at Washington University, who conducted the design modules in the curriculum of the Bauhaus. He was shaven bald, dressed in black and I was sure he was modeling himself after Oscar Schlemmer of the Bauhaus School. The lessons learnt of the utilitarian nature of design achieved through an economy of means, and a concern for materiality stayed with me. Later at the advance studios at Yale, I signed on to a Classical design studio under Thomas Gordon Smith but quickly realized that I did not belong in that studio. I found the treatises too dogmatic and never drew a single classical column in the semester. The presentations were to be in the form of the very tedious watercolour analytiques, a composite of plans, elevations, sections and details composed on a single board. The emphasis was on learning by rote the rules and syntax of classicism.

Even though I did not indulge in classicism in studio, I was freelancing with another student, Tim Steele, on a law office conversion in the evenings. The project we designed was orthodox classical and was replete with the Tuscan columns at the portico entrance and ionic columns in the Library. It was the beginning of an uneasy relationship with classicism. While I found it restrictive, I was also moved by its ability to produce grounded monumental spaces. At the final studio review at Robert Stern's New York office, Philip Johnson refused to discuss my project as I had not presented any elevations. The façade was presented as a blank wall against the existing Romanesque façade of the museum. I was interested in talking about concepts and spatial metaphors for the Harpiscord Museum addition. It was a time when appropriating a source and borrowing the façade to reinterpret could form the basis of the entire review; but the critics were interested in discussing styles. So it was that I never felt aligned to any particular movement. Upon graduating I sought an internship with the most orthodox of architects, Allan Greenberg, who did work in the White House and State Departments. My visits to Rome after graduation confirmed my conviction in the ability of classical spaces to move the human spirit.

I shall attempt to define a design methodology in the works of SCDA. The projects designed at SCDA refer to the fundamental elements of architecture (light, space, transparency, materiality and order) and aspire to humanist qualities such as serenity, beauty and order. The spaces are composed to be experienced sequentially through choreographed processions that recenter and realign the perceptual 'axis', terminating in landscaped vistas or open spaces. The approach in phenomenological and is about the emotional response of the user to the space. The figure of architectural forms, which are often a series of rectangular boxes, defined equally important courts, gardens and other external spaces set against the wall boundaries of the lots. The lots tend to be fairly rectangular and when it is not the differences are usually taken up by shrubs or landscape as Poche. This organizational strategy allows for the concept of 'inversion'. This can be interpreted architecturally as the building and outdoor court spaces (grounds) being given equal importance and weightage. This strategy has been applied to projects such as the Heeren Street House in Malacca, the Emerald Hill House and the Sennett House, among others, where the diagram of the expected open spaces (grounds) has been used to generate the building form.

The interstitial spaces between the building and its perimeter boundaries often created by zoning bylaws as setbacks are claimed to become defined view courts. Corners of rooms are often cut to destabilize the space propagating it outwards towards the garden or courts while

allowing for possibilities of refocusing the spaces centrifugally towards internal courts in the more urban typologies. Large sliding doors that disappear into pockets blur the interior zone to the fully exterior surface.

In the increasingly urbanized suburbs of Asia, there is a need for controlled views to ensure privacy of the occupants and this is manifested in the introduction of small courtyards and light wells within the plans. The incorporation of vernacular features in the early projects relied more on the imagery of the large overhanging hipped roofs of the colonial black and white bungalows. With time the projects began to evolve into more subtle compositions of spaces based on abstracted forms and on the circulation patterns of Asian dwellings.

The architectural language established in the design allows for typological interpretation for the houses we designed in South Asia. Projects, particularly the residential developments in the tropics, focused on the treatment of the 'in-between spaces' or the ambiguous boundaries in between the inside and outside that are integral architectural response to the climate of the tropics. The device deployed (the perforated surface, the tectonic screen or lattice of timber, metal or masonry) is manually or mechanically operated to temper the heat and glare of the sun in the equatorial climate. This screen, which is the staple of vernacular tropical house, is the mediating element between the opaque walls and the transparent glass fenestrations. This architectural veil alters the quality of light and shadow. It dematerializes surfaces and allows for translucency or opaqueness when strategically lit.

Liberated from notions of representation and the vernacular, the massing and façade is built on archetypal elements, of volume, light and surface. The walls are treated as separate planes allowing for physical material separation between walls. While this vocabulary provides possibilities to re-interpret and transform the spatial essence of a given vernacular, it is also able to incorporate the rudimentary elements of place making through considered interpretation of local craft, culture and climate.

This process of understanding by rote the basic building blocks of the architecture is not unlike the training in architecture in the Beaux. One must not confuse a consistent design language with a familiar style. I must stress that this approach has not in any way diminish the ability to layer a process and concept-oriented approach with the design practice; while the spirit of the spaces are classical, the details are universally modern.

In the late 1990s, new commissions of high-rise apartments that eventually came into the office provided opportunities to interpret typical low-rise spatial typologies into contemporary high- rise multi-unit dwellings. The opportunity to test the ideas came with the commission of two pivotal projects in 1999, the Lincoln Modern and the Ladyhill. In both projects, the spaces are conceived to be plastic and configured to interlock or slide by each other creating pockets of 'court spaces in the sky'. In the Lincoln Modern, the L-shaped sections of the units interlock and express themselves in the façade, an ode to Corbusier's immeubles villas. The result is three storey sky lobbies at each interlocking module, which is in turn expressed directly in the elevation. These three storey lobbies are conceived as sky terraces, bringing tropicality to the high-rise typology.

In the Ladyhill, the six internal courtyards became the organizing figurative space and interlock to form a rectangular volume. The apartment spaces are then organized around this spatial core. The interior spaces within the projects are the continuation of the architecture and within a reductivist aesthetic. The process of space-making is through clarifying structure and construction by expressing them as a composition of intersecting volumes, surfaces and planes. The palette deployed is natural and monolithic materials that are kept separate to each surface to clarify its formal composition. The manner of distilling the spatial ideas to their very essence – as dictated by the program – allows the subtleties and tectonics of the materials to express themselves. To transcend utilitarian concerns of program, the interior spaces are designed to achieve tranquility defined by clear spaces, light and composition.

Increasingly, as practice becomes globalized, the applied design vocabulary has to absorb nuance of climate, culture and place. Working with a clear design language allows for the reconciliation of issues of universality versus regional specificity.