

## THE SUSPENDED ARCHITECTURE OF SOO CHAN

Soo Chan cuts corners. He refuses to let rooms remain stable spaces. He creates mirrored versions of the same house next to each other and builds whole neighborhoods by fitting courtyard compounds, open spaces and roads around each other in meandering patterns. He slices the sides off rooms so they are open to the flows of modern life, and he puts stairs, beams and other protrubances in the middle of what should be open expanses. You would think that this would make the work seem ungainly or uncomfortable, but it only enhances the sense of its rightness.

The easiest explanation for why Chan does this (and clichés become so because they have at least some element of truth) is that his work intersects Eastern and Western influences. He was born in Malaysia and trained in the USA, but works in Singapore – where the concept of globalization seems a natural part of the social and cultural landscape – and draws on Eastern and Western traditions. His houses, stores and apartment buildings look like those Modernist structures that tend towards a dissolution into white planes, glass and exposed concrete. Yet their detailing pulls them into the context of the South-East Asian region: sloping roofs appear, as do wood shutters, and the rooms are open to each other to encourage the breezes to cut through the humid warmth. In this sense, Chan's work is part of an emerging 'Pacific Rim' consensus about using globally perfected building technologies and aesthetics developed by Western architects in an idiom, compositional array and material realization that derives from the local geographic, geological and climatological realities.

It is worth noting that Chan, however, was not trained in the mainstream Modernist tradition. He studied architecture at Yale during the heyday of Post-Modernism, when the thin, minimalist and revelatory methods of high Modernism were distinctly out of fashion. He chose to study with proponents of neo-classicism such as Thomas Gordon Smith and Rob Krier and went to work for one of the most rigidly retardataire practitioners of that mode, Alan Greenberg. Even when he graduated to corporate firms, he chose to find employment with Kohn Pedersen & Fox, who were at the time applying the narrative, referential and metamorphical appendages of Post-Modernism to otherwise meaningless office buildings.

Upon returning to South-East Asia, he specialized not in the design of new structures, but in historic renovation. Strangely enough, he seems to have immediately abandoned the stylistic accoutrements of the manner in which he had worked. What he retained was a flexibility about how he used forms and appearances in his work. In this sense, it would be safe to say that Chan is a Post-Modernist. He is a ruthless and effective scavenger of whatever organizational principles he thinks are appropriate for the situation in which he finds himself working. He believes that the memory contained in certain modes of construction are valuable ways of grounding new structures. Yet he also believes that architecture must respond to technologies that are mass produced and global, and understands that he works for a clientele that understands their world as much through CNN as through the stories their parents told them.

The first few major free-standing structures Chan designed, such as the Bishopsgate House of 1996 and the Fifth Avenue House of 1998, mixed bits of stone, wood columns, traditional courtyard floor plans, pitched roofs and a sort of minimally detailed, planar set of walls that one might expect in a completely different kind of house. They were referential and then undercut the stability of the structures to which they referred with flowing, contrapunctual floor plans and pinwheeling planar compositions.

The Fifth Avenue House in particular kept these pieces so beautifully in balance that none of the associations one might have with these different elements intrude on one's experience of the whole. The trick seems to have been Chan's discovery of a new kind of spatial suspension that

keeps one's understanding of the relationship of the different pieces to each other at bay. The courtyard here is a heavily planted pool, around which one circulates through rooms whose walls in some case start on the second level, as if they were floating on wood columns. Rooms such as the study and bedroom lift up towards sloping ceilings that rise above wood louvres, giving the interiors a similar sense of suspension.

As Chan began to edit down the palette with which he worked, the cuts and elongations became more compressed. The East Coast House of the following year is a compressed box that is completely closed to the outside. Here the courtyard has turned into an empty living room whose off-center focal point is a sunken seating area. Light washes in along the walls in a pattern that emphasizes them as planes and denies the constructional logic that might give them a clear reference point. Just as one might think that Chan was after an effect of weightlessness, however, beams connecting the ceiling plane to the rear wall and a spiral staircase squeezed into a small slot insert a sense of structure and form. Neither an abstract loft nor a figured room, the space hovers. The highly refined detailing, which rob stair treads in beautiful local wood and precious onyx of any visible means of support, furthers this almost uncomfortable sense of a house poised between nothingness and presence.

In the Sennett House, Chan achieved this same sense through the simple doubling of the home. The house is really two versions of the same design side-by-side. This duplicate form was the result of programmatic considerations, as the structure houses two families (a brother and a sister, and their respective spouses and children). The effect is striking. The houses turn twin facades, whose wood shutters and free-hanging planes already dematerializes them above a low wall, toward the street. The courtyard between the structure that follows behind this split face flows into the kitchen and living room areas with glass walls that slide out of sight. Sitting on the couch in one living room, one looks back across at a duplicate space. The come-back effect is much more powerful than what Chan achieves upstairs with more cantilevered stairs and suspended glass bridges.

In addition to designing a series of such highly refined houses, Chan has also created retail spaces and apartment buildings. In the former, he used scrims and obscuring glass to play a game of both hiding and revealing the items to be sold. In the latter, he confuses our reading of the height and proportions by grouping floors together, by emphasizing structural elements seemingly at random, and by undercutting the different planes whenever he can.

In these larger structures, and also in multiple dwelling projects, such as the housing development outside Shanghai that is currently under construction, Chan brings out the structure behind the suspension. It is a form of 'L' that can work horizontally as a combination of living room and kitchen for instance, or as a relationship between entry and living area. It can act vertically, as interlocking double-height and single-height spaces stacked up in apartment buildings, or it can appear in a large scale, as in the interlocking rows of houses in China. It can also work in physical structure, when plane and beam seem to grow out of each other. In all cases, there is a confusion of class or kind, as disparate scales, functions and spaces are melded together. What Chan keeps separate is material, so that the confusion gains by the inarticulation of the different textures, colors and associative elements.

Why does Chan do this, and does he do so consciously? He claims not to use these methods deliberately, and prefers to speak both of his love of Modernist painting and his desire to respond to local conditions, such as solar, wind direction and topography. These are logical explanations that one should take seriously. Perhaps one can also, however, see his architecture as emerging out of an intersection between a Western aesthetic and Asian conditions, but it might not be that easy to move from local conditions and global technology to an integrated response. There seems to be, rather, a kind of uncomfortableness about his

situation that he makes productive. Working in Singapore, where English is spoken in the tropics, the whole island is about to become a city as well as geographic entity, and trade, commerce and shopping are the main industries. There is a sense that he is operating in a kind of suspended artifice that slides into the jungle and away again on the next container ship or jumbo jet. To make something in Singapore you cannot be too definite, and Chan is a master of suspended disbelief.

Of course, this is only a sense one gets after a glide through Chan's buildings. His work has been limited in its scope and in its situation. That, however, is now changing as he is currently designing a columbarium, a toy museum, a retail village and a school. It will be interesting to see how his approach develops, not just in its sophistication and mature response to its context, but also in sites as disparate as India and Connecticut, USA, where he is currently designing projects. This writer senses both a suspension of disbelief in the compatibilities of many different traditions and technologies, and a belief in the certainties that architecture can provide. It seems like one can waft quite comfortably and elegantly through this suspension.

[Aaron Betsky]