

FOREWARD

In 2006 I reviewed the work of SCDA making an impassioned plea for us to look beyond the surface imagery of the body of work displayed. I asked that critics not appropriate this work to the canons of global architecture, but see it for what it does in its actual contexts. I challenged the notion that this was 'Pacific Rim' architecture – and should have dispelled the idea that Singapore is situated on that rim. That would have furthered my case for a much more rigorous critical attention to what the work actually is, avoiding simple categorising.

That essay repays re-reading with this new monograph documenting a further six years of work. The argument needs re-calibration. Then I was concerned that the work – although virtuoso and clearly authored by a powerful hand and eye – had not yet found its own voice and was still somewhat unconsciously embedded in the North American imperium. Perhaps I should have described that, in architecture, as an 'imperium of taste'. I anticipated that the work of SCDA would need to differentiate itself from that of analogous contemporary practice to whose outcomes the works in the first monograph showed superficial similarities.

There has been a differentiation, but it is not entirely, in fact not at all, the one that I anticipated. I expected the work to spin out of the neo-modernist frame, taking a colouring from the contiguous and teeming architectural contradictions of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Instead it has gone deeper into its purist origins, and in so doing has claimed a different corner of the contemporary architectural discourse from the one that I expected it to fill. In this monograph projects are clustered into hotels and resorts, houses, apartments, commercial and institutional buildings and furniture designs. Absent now are the shophouse alterations that perhaps misled me last time. There is in this monograph evidence of a breathtakingly even achievement of an architecture that conveys calm certitude, rational compositional ease, the orthogonal organisation of space between horizontal ground, water and sky planes – an oeuvre that occasionally embraces the sinuous in plan or section (W Hotel Seminyak, p.356; Mint Museum of Toys, p.156), but rarely allows inclination (Dhoby Ghaut Green, p.190 being the exception). This is an architecture that dispels doubt, fears of disruption, nightmares of the irrational and the contingent. It is an architecture proclaiming a perfectible universe.

Paging through this new monograph, the mind of this critic races towards a list of precedents, jumping readily to conclusions. Here are pavilions, some classically sedate and seeping references to Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (Alila Villas Soori, p.300). But here too (Singapore High Commission, p.164) is what appears to be a pavilion in which the parts are held apart in exquisite torsion, the sky plane slightly dished, its tensions seeming to come from its being sprung from an angled side wall leaning away to take the strain of a vast cantilever resting on a single column on the other side. An orthogonally articulated ground and water plane supports a rectangular box and a honeycomb brickwork cylinder. Look from the side however, and this is an entry portico nodding to Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and not to his Zurich pavilion. In the monograph there are numbers of masterfully marshalled intersecting box compositions (Lakeshore View House, p.250; Ocean Drive House II, p.268; Belmont Road House, p.258; Grange Road House I, p.276 and Illoura p.116 among them) and precedents for this extraordinarily accomplished array of manipulations come dimly to mind. These works overshadow their origins comprehensively. There are a number of slightly cranked slab blocks (Tagore Industrial Building, p.198; but also Oberoi and Trident Hotel, p.368) – think Pavilion Suisse via Gio Ponti. There are also village complexes (Project Square One, p.386) and Utzorn's syncopated housing comes to mind.

Indeed there is an urbanity threaded through all of this work that has one reaching to Scandinavia for precedents. In this quietly moderated modernism there are resonances with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, or St Catharine's College by Arne Jacobsen. In the SCDA tropical

manifestation of this mood there are more pronounced over-sailing roofs (Ridout Road House, p.240), more protected clerestory windows (Alila Villas Soori dining hall), more set-back columnar structures (pervasive), but there is the same urbane and modest civility. SCDA's Alila Villas Soori complex main square could be a model centre for a small new town in Finland, not far from one done by Alvar Aalto. The whimsy here and there sets this off, but does not materially influence the general architectural approach. An upturned boat roof in the Maldives (Park Hyatt Maldives, p.328) perhaps makes a slight obeisance to Gehry's Barcelona Fish. Or is this better read as an homage to Claes Oldenburg's large tumbling hat blowing through the modernist grids of Chicago, the Windy City? Sculptural incident rather than formal plasticity is the intention. But these are all my suppositions. The architect does not list the precedents. And as Kahneman¹ points out so vigorously, when analysing complex material we should beware the first ideas that come to mind. There may well be something in all of this, but what happens when we look harder, think harder? The recent research of distinguished architectural scholar Li Shiqiao² gives us some pointers here. Looking at this work we must be amazed at how readily internal contradictions are resolved. Never is a column array left hanging, incomplete. Here are no 'future ruins', no 'ruins in reverse'. Never is a box elided with others leaving a lingering question as to which is sliding through which. This is the rational compositional ease I wrote about at the outset. There are few bodies of work around the world that achieve this so consistently and seemingly so painlessly. Close observation reveals a base condition that allows for this seamless resolution: there is always enough space for the logic to play out without contradiction. This is a very unusual circumstance, and it says much for the wealth that has been generated in Southeast Asia in recent decades that this is the case. A mathematical Palladian rationality³ plays out in these houses – mansions really. A hermetic Arcadian picturesqueness houses these resorts – they do not bump up against the messy ambitions of competing developments. The apartments – often stand-alone, untrammelled by the needs of neighbours – also assert their primacy. The over-scale openings in the Angullia Park tower (p.122) are articulated to give the tower the appearance of a giant toy⁴, a set of cubes piled up. Even in those buildings where constraints seem to cause a crimping of the plan, or force a concertina pull on the façade, we are left with a resolved figure and no trace of what caused the pain. The architecture is resolved without contradiction, eschewing ambiguity.

What is the mindset here? What can be implied⁵ about the author's mental space? What is the author implying to himself? I suspect, following Li, that this is an idealist mind, one that pictures perfection and that then tries to manifest it through the specifics of projects. This position draws on an imagined perfected world beaming its intentions into our lives where our purpose is to realise that ideal to the best of our abilities. Its light pervades everything, our task is to see its rays and make them manifest. This idealism drives an architectural toolkit. Orthogonal relationships between literal and phenomenal transparency of horizontal and vertical planes, the floating of rectangular volumes and tabula rasa recasting of the ground and water planes, the creation of over-sailing sky planes. Between these carefully composing planes and columnar arrays, perfection can be achieved. Messy reality is edited out. Certainly, as project succeeds project in SCDA's practice, an ideal city is implied. Regard these works as the complete works of a city – much as renderers used to compose all of the works of an architect such as Sir John Soane into a single city image – what kind of a city does the architect have in mind? It is a very calm, ordered and civil city that suggests itself. Indeed the SCDA city that results from such imagining chimes with the Scandinavian social democracy project, a project that lies at the core of Singapore's foundation (however tarnished those founding ideals may have become through the emergence in both places of hegemonies of families).

There are two alternative positions that challenge this cool, idealist vision. These are the positions that, as it turns out, SCDA has differentiated its practice against. One, identified by Li, is that of political realism, a position that accepts that reality is a dark mess and then shines a beam of reason into that mess and seeks to ameliorate conditions in their actual context. Rem Koolhaas'

'tropical soup' urban plan strategies that accept that there is an unconquerable tide of informal urban flotsam in the tropical city into which an island of rationality may be floated, can be taken as a contemporary exemplar of this approach. In this approach it is accepted that only limited parts of the city can be resolved, and the juxtaposition between the formally ordered and the organically disordered is celebrated. Those whose work is largely made up of conversions of existing fabric and alterations and additions tend to adopt this view. Another position, always allied to the idealist and the realist but seldom discussed in architecture, is the libertarian or populist position. Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City⁶ is a founding exemplar, as are his Usonian house designs. The position appeared in art as 'Pop' and signalled an openness to everyday consumption, contingent immediate pleasures and a denial of any hierarchy between high and low culture or taste. We see this position in some of the more expressive and exuberant architecture formerly and currently emanating from Singapore.

The last six years of endeavour show that SCDA is differentiating itself away from the realist and populist positions, and becoming ever more adept at the idealist creation of segments of a calm, rationally composed architecture of perfection, achieving a planar architectural paradise supporting the aspirations of Asia's emerging middle classes, soon to be the largest civil elite in the world.

[Leon van Schaik AO]

- 1 Kahneman, Daniel (2011), *Thinking, fast and slow*, Allen Lane, London.
- 2 Li Shiqiao (2007), *Power and Virtue: Architecture and Intellectual Change in England 1660–1730*. Routledge, Abingdon; Li Shiqiao, Nikos Papastergiadis, et al (2009), 'Mimesis and Figuration: Large Screens, Cultural Creativity and the Global City', in William S.W. Lim (Ed.) *Asian Design Culture*, AA Asia, Singapore, pp. 18–24, 42–54.
- 3 Rowe, Colin (1976), *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge/London.
- 4 van Schaik, L (1985), 'Walls, toys and the ideal room: an analysis of the architecture of Sir John Soane' in Wall, Mary (Ed.) *AA Files*, No 9 (Summer), Architectural Association, London, pp. 45–53.
- 5 Pamuk, Orhan (2006) *The Implied Author*, translated by Maureen Freely (Ed.) in *The Saturday Guardian, The Guardian*, London (28 October), pp. 4–7.
- 6 Lloyd Wright, Frank (1945), *When Democracy Builds*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.