What is the situation of traditional architecture in Southeast Asia?

VIARO, Mario Alain

Reference

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In the mid-1970s, Southeast Asia was still one of the richest areas of vernacular architecture in the world, both in terms of diversity, social processes and quality of the buildings. Rapid urbanization and economic development of the countries in the region led to a massive destruction of these buildings and replacement by modern types at the beginning of the 1990s. We can only hope that most of the old structures had already been documented by scholars like Gaudenz Domenig.1 His contribution in this volume presents three examples of Indonesian buildings in Savu, Sa’dan Toradja, and Mamasa Toradja. It is the continuation of his long-term research about the origin of forms and their relations with the spirit world. It is a masterpiece of erudition, with rich references and based on his fieldwork forty years ago.

Prior to the 1970s, research in Southeast Asian societies rarely focused specifically on village and house building, but these topics were usually dealt with in chapters on material culture or social structure which, on a few pages, also described the house and its building materials. Later on, anthropological interest in the “house”, was largely reduced to its significance as a central element in the organization of a society.2 For sociologists and architects, the house, as opposed to the monument, became a subject of study in the 1960s only.3

In the 1970s and 1980s, following the exhibition “Architecture without Architects” organized by Rudofsky (1965), which traveled all over the world, there was a revival of interest in traditional architecture (Rapoport 1969, Guidoni 1979, among many others). Passive energy systems and the use of natural materials were seen as alternatives to a capitalist way of building and living (see, e.g., Boericke and Shapiro 1973). At the same time a growing number of research projects on traditional architecture in South World societies were published by young architects and anthropologists.4

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Alain Viaro is an architect and urban planner, senior lecturer at the School of Architecture, University of Geneva (1975-2004) and at the Graduate Institute for Development Studies (1995-2008). His work includes research on the subject of traditional architectures of the world for the UNESCO, Nias architecture and settlements (Indonesia), environmental and urban management research projects in Indonesia (Bandung), Pakistan (Swat Valley), Afghanistan (Kabul), and Rwanda (Kigali). He is a member of the Architectural Education Commission and the Validation Committee for Architectural Education, International Union of Architects (UIA).

E-mail: viaro@geneva-link.ch

1 An important part of Domenig’s research has been on the architecture among the Toba and Karo Batak of Sumatra (see bibliography).

2 A good example of this approach are the works of Fox (1980, 1993).

3 One of the first studies in this new approach was carried out by Chombart de Lauwe (1975).

International organizations and some European governments promoted the building with earth, bamboo, and wood as new solutions for the market. Examples of good practice were published in all magazines, and architectural awards were given to this category of buildings. The International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE) was established at the First International Symposium on Traditional Dwellings and Settlements held in Berkeley in 1988 (see Viaro and Ziegler 2007). Numerous architects wrote their MA or PhD theses in Anthropology on studies of traditional buildings: in Thailand and Laos (Charpentier and Clément 1978), Bali (Lancret 1998), Sumatra (Domenig 1980, 2003, 2008), Mentawei (Kis-Jovak 1980, 1991) and in many other places. It is noteworthy that the majority of these researchers were French, Swiss, German or Dutch but not Southeast Asian. An impressive Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World was published by Paul Oliver in 1997.

In Southern countries, there was no interest in architecture that used traditional techniques and materials. The elites in the South wanted modernity, economic development, skyscrapers, American style shopping malls, and Hispanic Style individual row houses. Asian countries were quick to completely change their rural and urban landscapes into Westernized patterns. Fashionable glass and steel buildings replaced even the four-star resorts from the 1980s, which had used vernacular styles. In Europe and the USA, however, the direction changed from traditional forms to ecological, passive energy buildings and eco-districts.

Crossing Southeast Asia from west to east and north to south, little remains from the past except the monuments. In Myanmar, traditional-type rural villages still exist in remote places where the houses are built on stilts with floor and walls made of panels of bamboo basketry and with a vegetal enclosure. Others, like the settlements in the Pagan plain were destroyed in order to “protect” the monuments when the site was brought to the list of the UNESCO World Heritage. In Thailand, only small pockets of old houses remain. They were transformed into hotels or residences for the rich in the 1980s. As fashion changed, they quickly disappeared. In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, urban colonial structures have been preserved and protected through development projects funded by the ex-colonial countries and for the purpose of mass tourism development. Two contributions in this issue, by Punto Wijayanto and Dinh Quoc Phuong, develop these aspects for Hanoi. However, it rather is the rural buildings and villages inhabited by ethnic minorities that deserve special attention in these countries. In the Philippines, it is very difficult to find any more authentic traditional buildings, except perhaps in Mindanao. In Malaysia, building and fire regulations and new urban planning provoked the systematic destruction of houses in wood. Today’s urban landscape is one of huge suburbs with row houses in concrete and skyscrapers in the different urban centers.

The only buildings considered worthy of protection are monuments, temples, and palaces. The Western ideology of conservation spread through all Southeast Asian countries and the tourism market profited immensely in this process. Every country wanted to have a set of monuments being included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, mainly as an incentive for mass tourism development, which in many cases resulted in the destruction of the environment and traditional architecture around the site. The rice terraces in Banaue (Luzon Cordillera, Philippines), listed as the “8th World Marvel” in 1996, are now surrounded by slum towns with houses built on concrete stilts above the rice fields and a four kilometer long road of shacks with restau-

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5 Promotion of Earth Architecture was made by the French Government in the exhibition Des Architectures de Terre ou l’avenir d’une tradition millénaire, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1981

6 It is worth mentioning the importance given to projects of traditional architecture conservation by the Aga Khan Architectural Awards and the Journal Mimar published between 1981 and 1991.
rants and craft stalls. Parts of Lijiang old town in Yunnan (China) listed in 1999 were demolished to create huge parking areas for buses and streets of fake Han architecture sheltering restaurants and souvenir shops. Old houses are converted into boutiques. And these are only two examples of what happens everywhere in the region.

Dinh Quoc Phuong’s article is an interesting work on urban history but he does not develop the specific case of the “tube house”, which is so characteristic of the merchant districts in Hanoi that were built at the beginning of the twentieth century. Punto Wijayanto looks at the conservation process of this type of building and wonders about the possibilities of recreating such a model. Many scholars have already published books and articles about the Old Quarter of Hanoi, especially French architects and urban planners. The “Chinese shop house” can be found throughout Southeast Asia. While it has been exhaustively studied from Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore to East Indonesia, far less research has been done in Indochina.

One country, where traditional architecture seems to have best resisted attempts of “modernization,” is Indonesia. Due to the vast extension of the archipelago, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and the preeminence of the island of Java as the political and economic center, large parts of the country have been untouched from major economic changes. Many islands have only small towns and ports and most of the populations still live in rural areas. Local traditional cultures are still alive, with the building of the village and the house being important factors for social cohesion. This can still be witnessed in the province of Nusa Tenggara (East Indonesia). From West Timor to Sumbawa, we find a huge diversity of architecture connected to the rich tradition of ikat weaving, which is used for ceremonies and feasts. The traditional houses are still built by the village community and the whole set of feasts are still celebrated in the course of the construction process. The houses have not been converted to being mere shelters but have maintained deep and important meanings. In Alor, for example, where a strong earthquake destroyed numerous villages in November 2004, the inhabitants of Takpala decided to rebuild the village themselves with local materials and by observing all ceremonial duties in order to keep their culture alive. They had to fight against government employees who intended to erect modern concrete shelters. In 2006 in the village of Nage (south of Bena) in Flores, we were present during the construction of a traditional house, which was accompanied by music and traditional ceremonies. Traditional houses are also built in Sulawesi, from south to north. In the north (Minahasa), there exists even an industry of prefabricated wooden houses, with model houses being built and exhibited along the street. The client can choose the size of his/her new home, the number of rooms, and the decoration of the veranda. The different parts are then transported by trucks and cargo to the different locations. In Solo and in surrounding villages (Central Java), which had been destroyed by an earthquake in 2005, the inhabitants decided to rebuild their houses in a traditional shape and through a participatory process (gotong royong), while they reused the bricks and wood of the destroyed buildings whenever possible.

Indonesia is also the only country where traditional buildings have been “modernized” in a way that they kept the same external aspect as before but integrated all elements of modern comfort. In December 2007, we saw many such examples in South Nias villages where the traditional façade and the public reception room had been kept, repaired and

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8 Goldblum (1987) wrote numerous books and articles on the subject, Kohl (1984) studied the shop houses in Malaysia, and Viaro (1992) questioned the definition of the model. Many other authors wrote on the same subject, mostly about the shop house in Singapore.
9 See the two volumes about Indonesian Houses published by Schefold et al. in 2003 and 2008 (39 contributions).
cleaned, while the private rear part of the house had been largely rebuilt with concrete extensions including a modern bathroom and sleeping rooms for the children.

The contribution by Irene Doubrawa and Ferenc Gábor Zámolyi demonstrates how these changes have taken place in South Sulawesi. Bugis and Makassar people traveled with their *pinisi* ships through the Indonesian Archipelago, but also to China, South Asia and Australia. Together with the construction technique of their boats, architectural knowledge and skills were spread throughout the region. On the other hand, merchants and sailors coming back to South Sulawesi brought with them new techniques and architectural forms from outside. Doubrawa and Zámolyi's article is interesting as it compares the Bugis buildings with the Malay house style which is present all over Indonesia and, of course, in Malaysia too. The only other contribution to this subject yet made was by Christian Pelras (2003), based on data collected since 1967.

Like in other Indonesian cultures, in South Sulawesi too, the front part of the house facing the street has a very important social function. In the 1970s in Java, during the time of the KIP (Kampung Improvement Programme) funded by the World Bank, the town planners were upset by the fact that the future inhabitants of the houses preferred to buy plaster columns with Corinthian capitals, which should be placed in front of the façade, instead of having an inside toilet installed in the building. In Nias, in front of some small houses built by the BRR for the disaster victims, a tiled floor terrace with a gate of cement columns was built by the owners. The reception and living room was also tiled and decorated with pink curtains, but the sleeping rooms remained without any improvement and only showed raw concrete walls.

Doubrawa and Zámolyi show and discuss in detail the importance of such signs of rank and status in house building.

Doubrawa and Zámolyi's discussion about house models, which were brought to Europe at the end of the nineteenth century by administrators, members of the army, or missionaries, is also new and can pave the way for future developments. All over Indonesia there is a tradition of such models made by carpenters. Some were made for religious reasons and used in specific rituals (as for example the small houses on the top of the roof in the Ngada villages of Flores), others were made for missionaries and tourists, others for the Dutch Military Schools, like the one in Breda. They were used by the students to learn how and where to attack the house and quickly destroy it. Such models are found in every museum in the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria (Köpke 1985), countries where the colonizers and missionaries came from. Gaudenz Domenig also used these objects to develop his theories about the development of the gable architecture through Southeast Asia (1980). Tillema (1922) made a full use of such models from Dutch Museums for his numerous publications about Indonesian material culture in the 1920s.

The subject of surveying traditional architectures in these regions is a huge task as most of the carpenters or informants who still know about the social and religious meanings of the house, and who are able to construct such houses, are gradually disappearing.

Traditional architectures that cannot convincingly justify their existence for economic, touristic, or cultural reasons will quickly disappear in the next decade. With growing education, economic improvement, globalization, access to the media, internet and TV, the village people will demand modern houses with hygienic and comfort facilities, and this is only fair and normal from their point of view. We saw the case in Nias in 2007: the NGOs in the field had to accept that nobody wanted to return anymore to their old houses, everybody wanted to have a modern concrete building.

For research and other academic reasons, it would be very useful to have a comprehensive list of publications with studies already carried out about traditional architecture, country by country, and compare it with a list of the different cultures in Southeast Asia where such buildings have been produced. This would clearly indicate in
which areas where such studies are lacking and where there is a need to send students with this kind of research agenda. Unfortunately, this is a difficult task to do because it would involve a good general knowledge of each of the countries, the possibility to visit all places, access to archives in the countries concerned as well as those by the former colonial administrations, and questionnaires sent to all universities and academic libraries in the world. But if such a project cannot be done, an important part of the human heritage and its diversity is condemned to disappear forever.

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Traditional Architecture in Southeast Asia

85
Lancret, Nathalie

Nguyen, Laurence

Oliver, Paul

Paul-Lévy, Françoise and Marion Segaud

Pedelahore De Loddis, Christian

Pelras, Christian

Rapoport, Amos

Robin, Christelle

Rudofsky, Bernard

Schefold, Reimar et al.

Tillema, H. F.

Viaro Alain

Viaro, Alain and Arlette Ziegler