



# Japanese modernity deviated: Its importation and legacy in the Southeast Asian architecture since the 1970s



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## ABSTRACT

This article examines architectural development in Southeast Asia since the 1970s as the legacy of a modernity imported through foreign paradigms, in which Japan played a leading role. Post-war Japanese architecture, initially characterized by derivativeness, is argued to have transformed into a discourse on deviation of modern architecture. The nature of post-war Japanese architecture's influence on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, especially Singapore, is studied here through a particular association with historical situations as developmental states.

Two case studies—Kenzo Tange and Fumihiko Maki—are chosen for their different perspectives on Japanese architecture, which provide an alternative example of modern identity in Southeast Asian architecture that interacts with and contradicts local contexts. The authors reveal a forgotten story in the architectural development of Southeast Asia and Japan.

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## Introduction

Compared with the political recovery and economic cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries, recognition of the contribution of Japanese architecture to modernity in this under-developed area is belated (Goto & Kratoska, 2003; Sudo, 2003). For some time, an uneasy memory of war has clouded the pan-Pacific region. The 1950s were not an appropriate time for Japan to act as a contributor to foreign countries. One of the first post-war contacts was made by Japanese scholar Susumu Kobe—a traffic economist rather than an architect—as a member of a specialized UN consulting group. He aided Singapore's urban renewal plan in 1963, which announced the prologue of Japanese architecture and planning in Southeast Asia (Abrams, Kobe, & Koenigsberger, 1963; Perry, Kong, & Yeoh, 1997; Yuen, 1998).<sup>1</sup> Japanese design companies have since consulted on many local projects.

Most of the contemporary studies on Japanese architects include works within the territories of Japan, yet their work and influence

outside Japan are rarely explored (Bognar, 1985; Frampton, Lim & Taylor, 1999; Xue, Peng, & Mitchener, 2009; Xue, Sun, & Tsai, 2011). This unbalanced situation becomes even more obvious among the developmental states in Southeast Asia, where large collections of Japanese architecture could potentially contribute derivative schemes to tropical modern architecture.

This article examines Japanese architecture in Southeast Asia to identify the process of its exportation and legacy in relation to the modernization of these tropical developmental states. A variety of attitudes are expected in dealing with whether Japanese architecture is the result of political manipulation, economic incentives, or both. The authors focused their investigation on Singapore and targeted completed works, especially those designed by Kenzo Tange and Fumihiko Maki. They also visited some Southeast Asian stakeholders. This article is intended to fill a gap in Asian architectural studies.

### *Japanese architecture as a derivative modernity*

As the developing states in the Southeast Asian region struggled to formulate an economic boom, Japan expressed similar political and economic desires, but with a more reserved and experimental attitude regarding how to heal the society. Japanese architecture has endured by transitioning into an alternative architectural modernity within its own context. A new “prototype” for *par excellence* Japanese architects such as Kenzo Tange could not be

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<sup>1</sup> An edited selection of the planning report was later published in *Habitat International*, 5(1/2):85–127, 1980.

achieved through simple imitations of foreign or domestic paradigms (Isozaki, 1983; Tange, Asada, & Otani, 2004).

This trend of self-recovery in Japanese architecture reflects not only an awareness of “national identity and cultural distinction”, but also hidden foreign resources (Lim, 2008; Thorne, 1999). In its early stages during the 1950s, Japanese architecture represented a novel change from its Western counterparts, characterized by little from its own culture. Tange’s architectural theory of human and social scales derived from a discussion between him and Gropius in London and his system illustrating the hormone architecture behind the urban formation of “trunk, branch, and leaf” appeared to be inspired by Watson and Crick’s biological theory of DNA (Sharp, Kurokawa, Slessor, & Ohashi, 1999). Maki refined his “collective forms” through the formation of the villages spreading around the Mediterranean Sea. The megalomaniacal proposals of the Japanese Metabolism architectural movement to colonize Tokyo Bay were cradled in the conceptions offered by Yona Friedman and the Archigram Group, whereas Kurokawa accredited its origin to the imported parapsychological idea of Holonic theory coined by Arthur Koestler (Frampton, 1995; Kurokawa, 1995).

The 1960 World Design Conference in Japan declared Japanese Metabolism a prototype of Orientalist deviation, and seemed to receive positive feedback from renowned international attendees, including Paul Rudolph, with whom Tange would share a co-patronization of Singapore a decade later (Kawazoe, 1970; Stewart, 1987). The Metabolists believed that they had gained, as in modernism, a universal power in leading modernity. Meanwhile, invited foreign projects instigated and assured a fever of Orientalism (Said, 1979), such as in the project at Skopje City that earned Tange a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Gold Medal in 1965 and another master plan in San Francisco marking his debut in North America for which he earned an American Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medal in 1966. For the finale, such projects permeated the 1970 World Exposition (Expo) and their *avant garde* nature summoned foreign architects.

The 1970 Expo thus acted as a watershed for the discussion featured in this article, not only because it symbolized the maturation of Japanese modern architecture under the guidance of Metabolism, but also because given the post-war economic and political liaisons between Japan and Southeast Asia, it was the first time pan-Pacific governmental communication was overarched by Japan on an architectural design level. The ASEAN architects were intrigued by alternative modern architecture. Comparing the pavilions of ASEAN countries with the massive Metabolist structures, one immediately senses the lagging qualities of the former in both architectural principle and construction technology (Xue, Jing, & Hui, 2013). ASEAN projects, such as those in the Philippines by Leandro V. Locsin and those in Singapore by Lim Chew Kuan, all followed layouts reminiscent of the Pacific Ocean that were overwhelmed by a nostalgic feeling of tradition and vernacular skills (Tange, 1969).

However, a principle of derivativeness is that it is destined to damage local built environments. At the Expo, even Tange surrendered authority over architectural quality when he admitted that the inflexible mega-structures were not “neutral and self-effacing” (Tange, 1969). The same was true, such as when Kurokawa tried to harmonize his “invisible” symbiosis, as geometrically calculated as a Phileban solid, in his recent work at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia (see Fig. 1) and in the earlier the Lane Crawford Place in Singapore (see Fig. 2).

The urgent political and economic situations inherent in ASEAN countries have spared little time for consideration by this deviating Japanese modernity. Rem Koolhaas described it as “the only non-Western architectural avant-garde in 5000 years,” a symbol too powerful in effacing the signatures of former dominators for their



Fig. 1. Kuala Lumpur International Airport.



Fig. 2. Lane Crawford Place.

nation building (Koolhaas et al., 2000). During this process, Singapore has most effectively assimilated foreign designs to benefit its own indigenous modernity.

#### *Kenzo Tange and the modernity of Singapore*

Singapore exhibits uncompromised ambition and a strong appetite for modern society and proactive architecture. The population of local graduate architects since 1963 has been insufficient in both quantity and quality to provide enough comfortable and hygienic modern spaces within a limited budget. The ultimate goal of moving from the colonial past into modernity has been thwarted by ideological contradictions, funding shortages, and technological deficiencies. Consequently, Singapore fully implemented the advanced model of foreign developed countries by accepting their dominant investments and architectural design qualities. The Western influence is discernible. By 2012, more than 21 design companies, including some from the US, the UK, and Australia, had participated in Singapore’s building activities.<sup>2</sup> Among them were featured architects such as I. M. Pei, Paul Rudolph, John Portman, Richard Meier, James Stirling, and Helmut Jahn. In addition to these practices, through which more than 68 buildings have been

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of projects are counted from Wong Yunn Chii (2011), *Singapore 1: 1* (2 vols), Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, as well as respective websites of participating architectural practices. For details please refer to URA’s website: <http://www.ur.gov.sg/uol/>.

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