There is a new condition of ideological politics today, one which no longer deals with the class struggle of communism versus capitalism, of First World versus Third World, but with an ideological condition based on geopolitics. Geopolitics involves two conditions: one, that despite the increasing mediation of the globe as a single entity, location has become an important political factor; and two, since western capital finds itself unable to continue to provide for the economic, social and political infrastructure that evolved in the nineteenth century, the emerging Pacific Rim and Muslim world countries, and their geopolitical positions, are no longer necessarily dependent on the western world for capital.

The idea of western capital evolved gradually over 200 years; it grew out of the revolutionary and ideological politics of the class struggle against the ancien régime. Most manifestations of western colonialism were grounded in this ideology. When colonialism is no longer a dominant ideology, class politics is replaced by a politics of location. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are examples where a politics of place is evident. An aspect of this concerns the survival of a secularism which is no longer dependent on a western colonial condition. Since western capital is no longer able in its economic framework to provide for its own infrastructure, it can hardly support an iconic structure, that is, a critical structure for architecture. In such a context, architecture is no longer seen as relevant. Instead, information-age capital is being invested in an infrastructure necessary to maintain a high level of services that has nothing to do with architecture and iconic symbolism.

In Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the idea of a critical architecture has little relevance because there is no enabling mechanism to support such an idea. This gap in society’s sensibility as to what would even constitute a critical architecture and its purposes, leads to a fracturing of architecture away from its social, ideological and iconic purposes. And since the ideological mechanisms which sustained a critical architecture in the West for 200 years are no longer in place, the questions that must be asked are, what is the nature of a critical architecture in the context of the geopolitical, and if such an idea of the critical could be formulated, what would be its relevance today?

The idea of a critical architecture began in the late
eighteenth century, and was always related in the western world to an ideological politics. Two figures, Immanuel Kant and GB Piranesi, are important. Kant formulated the critical as that condition of being which speaks of the possibility 'in being' of knowledge. The idea of the possible deals with both the present and the future. In succession, therefore, the ideas of the future, the avant-garde and the modern became linked with the critical. In the late nineteenth century, the rise of an avant-garde was an attempt not only to protect art from capital, but also to protect the system of the critical from erosion by capital. For while the critical evolved in tandem with the ideology of capital, the critical as it concerns the possibility of knowledge was always against any accommodation with the status quo. Thus, for a time the critical and the avant-garde were synonymous.

Also in the late eighteenth century, Piranesi translated Kant’s discourse into a manifestation in architecture. In his drawing of the Campo Marzio, Piranesi presented, in the forms of both ancient and invented building types, a city plan that stood as a critique of the existing hierarchical structure of centralised axial cities that symbolised the central authority of the ancien régime. In Piranesi’s drawing, buildings were jammed one next to the other, creating urban spaces that had never before been conceptualised. His drawing was not merely a new iconic representation of city, but also contained the possibility of city in its critique of the existing order. Succeeding generations of architects, from Ledoux and KF Schinkel to Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, conceptualised architecture in a similar critical manner, always in relationship to an ideological politics.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, critical architecture has always been seen as part of the ideological struggle of the emerging classes, whether in the form of new countries or in new building types, against the established order of things. It was transgressive of the existing politics and embodied that transgression, however, in order to be so, a critical architecture needs an enabling mechanism. When there is no longer an ideological class struggle, what is there for architecture to symbolise? And if architecture is no longer symbolic of any ideology, capital asks, for what reason is architecture necessary? The present condition of capital does not seem to provide the enabling mechanism for the critical, but its tradition remains. At present, there is no tradition in the emerging geopolitical politics of such an enabling mechanism. Rather, the reverse seems to be true, that is, to build in the emerging countries requires accommodation rather than transgression. In the face of geopolitical reality, critical architecture becomes accommodating. Whether the populations of these countries understand this or that style, Post-Modernism from Modernism, High Tech from Low Tech, deconstruction from no construction, is not the issue. What is at issue, is that they intuitively know the difference between an architecture of an ideological politics and an architecture without one. The critic Walter Benjamin said that the perception of architecture for most people is a casual phenomenon; they do not see architecture in the same way that they see art. In one sense it is true that people absorb architecture casually, without study. However, this does not mean that they are casual about it. Any power structure finds critical or transgressive architecture clearly problematic; they do not like to confront the destabilising idea of architecture as a critical discourse.

The relevance of the critical for emerging nations is that it is the one aspect of knowledge that examines the conditions of its own possibility. This is parallel to the self-examination necessary to the development of the geopolitical in emergent nations. In architecture this examination is not merely the possibility of knowledge itself, but the possibility of self-representation. The critical deals not just with meaning and symbolism, but with the possibility of symbols and their capacity to act critically. In other words, not what knowledge is, but rather the conditions for representing its possibility. Therefore, the critical in architecture has always been the possibility of both the self-representation of the possibility of architecture's being; and of its being something other than merely being. This self-reflexivity is important to the philosophical or theoretical condition of the idea of the critical; that is, architecture is always understood to be concerned with being understood as the metaphysics of process. Its being always incorporates function, iconography, et cetera, whereas the critical in architecture examines the conditions of the possibility of being. It was this examination that sustained the ideological framework of architecture as a critical discourse from 1760 to 1960. Clearly the issue today is,
whether there is any need for architecture to examine the possibility of being, when in fact it has a difficult time merely sustaining being itself. In other words, when 250,000 housing units need to be built in eighteen months, does one need to examine the question of the possibility of meaning? Is there the time, energy or support system for such an examination? And if so, does it need to be manifest in the architecture?

The aspect of the discourse of the critical that becomes important in the context of the geopolitical is the idea of the self-referential. This idea concerns not how one reflects being or the possibilities of being, but how one deals with the possibility of this being in architecture. That self-referentiality has been the fundamental condition of modernism. According to the writer Umberto Eco, modernism stands as the single operating principle of an ideological politics against what he calls an 'ur-fascism'. What distinguishes modernism from any classical western discourse is, first, the notion of turning back on one's self to ask internally about one's own possibility of being, and second, the idea of the reconciliation of opposites and their reinscription into being of the concept of the opposite or the other in the thing itself.

The problem that modernism confronts today is that of its own success. The notions of standardisation, reproduction, replication and repetition were ideological constructs in modernism. Today they have lost their critical content because they have become absorbed by consumption. The success of modernism has been lost, and with it, its critical ideological function, because it became consumed by capital. Rather than transforming capital, capital has transformed the modern. Today the modern has no capacity to support a critical architecture, rather, a self-reflexive alternative to modernism must be found. This is media.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, another (third) political discourse has emerged, focusing on the condition of media. Media today has become a self-generating body rather than a condition related to critical thought. It has been disconnected from a critical attitude and therefore forms its own generating mechanism. Media generates media. Media, because it is allied with a consumer society and the politics of the new, has taken the idea of the new away from the critical. Media is against the notion of any kind of enabling mechanism within an architectural
phenomenon, since media continues to consume and regurgitate anything that is attempting to remain. And yet it is precisely media which contains the possibility of a critical architecture versus an architecture of accommodation.

From the time of the Gothic cathedral, architecture was strong media. People understood the Latin liturgy by comprehending the sculpture and artefacts on the walls and facades of the buildings. With the advent of the printing press, media itself became more dominant, and architecture became less important as media. While architecture in one sense will always mean, today it has become a form of weak media. Because the stronger other media becomes, the less important the mediating influence of the iconic structure of architecture becomes. Most people gain their idea of social and political structures today not from architectural iconography but from media. If architecture is to sustain ideas today, and if ideas in some way reflect knowledge in architecture, then these ideas must concern architecture's possibility to be media. In order to understand the relationship of architecture as media to knowledge, one must examine the possibilities of the conditions of knowledge in a mediated architecture. How does knowledge maintain itself in presence? In opposition to all other forms of media, architecture maintains a presence through an affective relationship to the physical experience of the body. Where conventional media has trivialised the body, critical architecture restores the relationship between the mind and the body.

Media formerly generated a critical architecture. It sustained itself through critical architecture. One has only to look at the importance of manifestos and contemporary journals to the development of modern architecture in 1920s Europe to demonstrate this point. Today, media has become disassociated from the idea of critical architecture and merely generates mediated architecture. The postcard view of architecture has nothing to do with the critical discourse of a building.

Internationalisation has been brought about by media. To most of us, this would mean the resolution of seeming difference, but in fact, internationalisation and media are creating new differences. Media has provided a new means for coalescing fundamentalist activity in both the West and the East. There is paranoia among white fundamentalists in the United States that the 'world' is trying to take over their government, while the paranoia in the rest of the world is just the reverse. This double paranoia creates difference that is not between West and East, but a difference over the discourse of the international. This directly affects the idea of western capital in relation to the East, because western capital as we have known it is no longer able to support infrastructure, health services, education, science, research and capitalisation in the United States and other western countries. The idea of architecture as a critical discourse based on ideological politics - as it was in modernism - is no longer sustainable. What we begin to see in Seoul, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Singapore and Shanghai is the recolonisation through economic capital of the influence of westernity. But this recolonisation is no longer in the spirit of confrontation between old and new, as modern architecture first was, but rather concerns an architecture of accommodation. An architecture that allows anything to be read by anybody; a 'Teflon' architecture. It is a new conservatism dressed up to look modern, without the sustaining ideology of politics, and with the ideology of capital accommodation.

It is possible today to make signature architecture without being avant-garde, new or critical, but simply by being a product of media. This creates a public confusion regarding both the relevance of architecture as well as its relevance to any kind of critical thought. This issue is important. In the production/consumption world, if capital can no longer sustain the infrastructure necessary to maintain a critical discourse, and if, traditionally, part of the capital production and consumption cycle was about the production of an ideological discourse, then the critical becomes an even more important concept today.

Kant talked about knowledge as the critical examination of the conditions of its own possibility, that is, the possibility of the being of knowledge. A critical architecture which attempts to transcend accommodation can only do so through a critical examination of its own conditions of being, its own possibility of existence. This condition of the critical examination of the possibility of an architectural knowledge can only be done through the discipline of architecture to enable or empower the discipline to become again a relevant ideological instrument in an emerging world.