

Perspectives and Limits on Regionalism and Architectural Identity

By Brian Brace Taylor

Regionalism and architectural identity are topical issues these days, and if they do nothing else, they are capable of stimulating vociferous defenders and opponents of such ideas to unimagined heights of critical rhetoric. The subjects are not new by any means, even in the case of contemporary architecture in non-Western cultures. The theme of MIMAR 13, which dealt with colonial architectures, approached some similar issues but in an entirely different manner. (A minimum amount of rhetoric, we hope). It was an overdue attempt to clarify some of the qualities of the architectural heritage of Western empires, and the mechanisms which brought it into existence, in colonised lands of the South and East.

The question of 'identity', whether it referred to the (imperial) style in which buildings were built, the tastes of those who designed them or the people upon whom they were imposed, was only alluded to — the purpose, in that introductory article, being to emphasise the sources and outcomes of a certain cross-fertilisation in colonial architecture, that was often a *metis*. Today, what is at



Billboard advertising for Suanphlu Garden housing, under construction in downtown Bangkok. Rungsan Torsuwan, architect. Photograph: Brian Taylor.

stake, basically, are the effects, upon the designers of new buildings and the clients of their numerous, continuing encounters with differing civilisations. This bombardment of influences from alien cultures upon recent generations of all social classes and walks of life in developing countries is largely due to the power of the media, printed and audio-visual, since 1950.

The rapid multiplication and spread of information and images has caused some to indulge in soul-searching, and wringing of hands, others to fall back upon a limited, known set of expressive tools, e.g. an indigenous language, and others to readily adapt to each passing fashion.

Few architects (I know of none

personally) would ever qualify themselves as 'regionalist' in their perceptions or their approach to design. Most architects conceive of their role within a more localised realm, or on the contrary, a wider framework. Giving these practitioners of the profession space to express themselves on the issue, as we have on the following pages, the evidence is that they tend to associate themselves with intellectual, social and religious movements of an international, inter- or cross-cultural nature; or, with the immediate context in which they operate.

Thailand's Sumet Jumsai, a gifted and articulate designer, moves in a society that is particularly open to outside cultural influences. Trained abroad yet steeped in the building traditions of his own surroundings¹, Jumsai observes what has been happening of late on the architectural scene, both in the West and at home, with ironic, critical bemusement. The subject of his article reproduced here² is ostensibly Post Modernism in the West and its implications for architecture elsewhere in the world. How-

Left: Recent high-rise apartment block in Bangkok by architect Ong Ard. Note the neo-classical temple as penthouse capping the structure. Photograph: Brian Taylor.

¹ see his book: *Naga — Oceanic origins of Culture in the West Pacific and in Siam, Bangkok, 1985 (paperbook, in Thai)*.

² First published in *The Nation, Bangkok*, 22 August 1985.

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ever, the full weight of Jumsai's words only really becomes apparent when one has visited Bangkok recently and seen what a playground it is for *pastichers*, those who are producing wholesale imitations of Western architectural styles for public consumption.

The rampant use of neo-Classical fragments (Greek, Roman, and hybrid versions of these) in reinforced concrete to decorate buildings, is the result of a combination of factors: the architects' desire to be part of a 'global' trend characterised by Western classical decoration *and* a certain strata of Thai society that wishes to advertise their worldly success. Sukhumvit Garden City is a representative example of this. The first houses in the development were in 'Swiss chalet', or 'Spanish' styles and were quickly followed by 'Roman' (or as locally-referred to, 'Louis' style). Clients admittedly identified more readily, and with greater satisfaction, with the monumental vocabulary of such temple architecture, sensing its world-wide credibility. In a subsequent rival project, the architect is proposing the dignity and authenticity of Gothic-style housing; Suanphlu estate will have low-rise as well as tower units imitating cathedral architecture of the Middle



Sukhumvit Garden city in downtown Bangkok under construction. Housing in "Style Louis...". Photograph: Brian Taylor.

Ages, complete with a Rose Window. (The sales brochure includes a photograph of an unnamed Gothic edifice).

Kenneth Frampton, the Anglo-

American critic best summed up the phenomenon expressed in these Thai buildings when he remarked: 'In contradistinction to Regionism, the primary goal of Populism is to function as a *communicative* or *instrumental sign*. Such a sign seeks to evoke not a critical perception of reality, but rather the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information'.³ The same would surely apply to the Bohra houses described here by Mr Doshi, where the eclectic decorative schemes demonstrate a wide-spread popular sign-language communicating the wealth and social status of a specific group.

Fundamentally different are the examples such as Ong Ard's condominium housing or Jumsai's Bank of Asia headquarters in Bangkok, or the latter's Thammasat University (to be published in MIMAR 20). These apartment, institutional or commercial structures are opportunities for establishing a dialogue with ancient building traditions and/or contemporary history of building. The Ong Ard building is not a high-rise block masquerading as a temple; but conversely

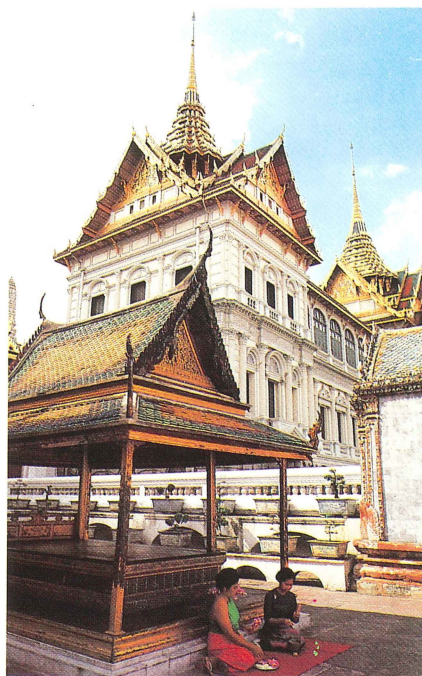
³ Frampton, K. "Prospects for Critical Regionalism", *Perspecta* 20, 1983, p. 149.

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is a tall building with a temple penthouse. Jumsai and Doshi alike would decry the superficial, purely formal, accommodations of a pastiche architecture, and support the inclusion of those elements which can incorporate meaningful signs from non-local sources — provided that these create a dialogue of some significance with local culture.

One of the principal reasons why both the terms 'regionalism' and 'identity' are so suspect as tools of criticism is that the *affinities* a designer, or a patron, may feel for other cultures, or civilisations, frequently change. It is of little significance to an historian or critic of architecture to say that Le Corbusier, for instance, was a 'regionalist' architect later; nor to say that Frank Lloyd Wright was a regionalist architect in California when he proposed the 'textile-block' houses of the 1920's, for, in terms of a structural system, materials, and 'style' these had much deeper implications.

Wright once said: "Again I found repeatedly confirmed that the inferior mind not only learns by comparison, but loosely confers its superlatives, while the superior mind which learns by analysis refrains from superlatives. I have learned about architecture by root, by world-wide travel and by incessant experiment



Chakri Hall, Grand Palace of the Royal Family of Thailand. It reflects the eclectic tastes of 19th century Siamese leaders, where ornate temple architecture was grafted onto an otherwise "classical" style.

and experience in the study of nature."⁴ He was *not*, as I interpret him, denying

the use of comparisons as one tool of analysis but was instead against irresponsible value judgements where one thing was better, or more beautiful, than another.

I would venture that the plethora of articles on 'regionalism' is symptomatic of attempts in our time to find all-encompassing labels for disparate personalities and works of creation that are being compared for the wrong reasons. The ease and regularity with which some writers proclaim the existence of heretofore unnoticed 'isms' has set an unfortunate precedent. It's like a new sauce which one ought to try. A British television series has taken up the theme of architecture 'at the crossroads', *throughout the world*. This kind of treatment is an over-simplification and results in the loss of a sense of context for the individual work and for the principal actors involved. On the one hand, not enough information is provided for understanding the specific forces that have brought about a given work, or a man's approach to design; on the other hand, to label a man or his work as 'regionalist,' is a misnomer because it *disregards* potentially universal levels of meaning.

⁴ Wright F.W., *A Testament*, 1957.