

An unrecognizable reflection

Apart from its primary role towards shelter, architecture often takes on the role of being a symbol. By means of its buildings, a city can choose to convey messages to its inhabitants and the world beyond. This symbolic nature of buildings is often a response to the current social setting. Architecture is born out of a need for social reform and buildings are orchestrated to symbolise certain qualities. A case in mind would be Singapore - how a small sea port town turned itself into an economic front-runner and the role architecture has played in its growth.

Singapore has had its share of instability, from its time of being a British colony and the Japanese occupation in the Second World War, to the merger with Malaysia and finally, leaving to form the Republic of Singapore in 1965. From its new found independence in the 60's to its global stature now, the country has seen exponential growth, which can be accredited to the vision of its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. His calculated interventions allowed Singapore to break free from the reigns of British rule and become the flourishing country it is today.

With no common language and a highly heterogeneous population, Yew understood that Singapore was not the ideal nation. The city then was populated by a mix of colonial structures and vernacular Malay wooden houses, characterized by sweeping gabled roof structures on stilts. The existing city fabric had the semblance of a crude society worn down by poverty and homelessness. While contextually relevant and climatically sound, the image of the city was far from that of any first world country. He knew that for Singapore to compete on the global circuit, he needed to provide Singaporeans with housing and employment opportunities, thereby ensuring economic stability.

He envisioned a transition to take Singapore towards an urban future. Over the last 6 decades, the establishment of the Housing & Development board has resulted in around 80% of the population living in housing board flats as a welcome respite to the unhygienic slums and settlements. The key here was to accommodate density on a small island, giving rise to tall structures with compact units. To provide an environment of improved quality, housing was planned with macroscopic motives such as "Universal Design" and generating encounter between inhabitants. The former strategy targeted at making the city accessible and available to all, independent of their economic status. It also catered to making the city and its buildings traversable to all, keeping in mind all age the groups and physically challenged. The resultant altering skylines became a reassurance to the public that they would have a place to call home, which in turn stabilised the political reign of the country.

With the spiralling growth of skyscrapers in Western world, it was but natural for the Eastern world countries to perceive it as synonymous with economic foothold. To mark their financial dominance, glass structures began to sprout across the Central Business District of Singapore. The establishment of Singapore as the largest foreign exchange center in Asia only further fuelled the uprising of glass clad skyscrapers. One way buildings try to exert their power is through height, each trying to surpass the previous contender. The Tanjong Pagar Center was conceived to be the tallest building in Singapore. Standing 290m tall, SOM's design concept of 'Integrated Vertical Living' was in line with Yew's vision for an urban Singapore. However, the site is set right in the heart of the Tanjong Pagar district, known for its heritage buildings. Having been the center of the city in the 1870's, the area is home to beautiful shophouses. The structures were characterised by colonnaded shopfronts and coloured facades boasting wooden windows. In a district of two storeyed structures, the invasion of skyscrapers, alien to the remnants of its past, leaves it incoherent and confusing.

Another expression of power is to make buildings 'iconic', mostly in reference to the form of the building. Often, eye catching buildings are easily identifiable and hence tie themselves to the minds of the public. Many of the country's recent buildings including the Marina Bay Sands, The ArtScience Museum and the Theatres by the Bay succumb to the trend of being iconic. Amongst residential buildings, "Reflections at Keppel Bay" falls under this category. Daniel Libeskind's take on vertical housing towers has resulted in sleek curving structures with interspaces to enjoy the scenic views of the ocean around. With the addition of such buildings, the skyline of Singapore has now become recognisable universally as a symbol of hope and prosperity, akin to those in metropolitan cities across the world. While it is safe to say that Singapore is consistently surpassing Lee Kuan Yew's vision, is it losing itself in a race with no end?

The identity crisis in Singapore can be viewed as a two pronged problem. One being that a futuristic country is unable to balance the fabric of its past. The other issue plaguing the country (and by extension, the world) is the myopic understanding of the emblematic quality of buildings. The country seems to be caught in a maze of mirrors, lost in the mirage of its reflections.

While Singapore is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan in nature, there still lies in troves the deep history and culture of its past. The city is now characterised by a strong juxtaposition of its past and future. There exists a pluralism to the urban fabric, a periodic build up with time. The resulting city fabric is a potpourri of styles, each distinct from the other. The Tanjong Pagar Center illustrates a strong juxtaposition of ideas because it does not respond to its context. The design catered to the program of the building, connecting the ground plane to the tower by means of urban walkways and gardens. However it failed to recognise and address a contextual mismatch that arises when the Central Business District is located in the heart of a heritage area.

A contrasting example would be the Clarke Quay revitalisation. Along the banks of the Singapore River, Clarke Quay was the hub of trading activities in the Colonial era. With the relocation of cargo services to an alternate location, the river was relegated to pollution and abandonment. The late 1970's saw the revival of the banks and the restoration of the surrounding buildings. The urban redevelopment of the district primarily targeted the shopfronts. The boundaries began to blur, spaces began to spill over into the street, enticing the public to engage with the space. The intervention of fabric tensile roofs for the outdoor seating spaces poses a duality of materials, times and technology. The beauty of Clarke Quay is that it thrives on this duality - A co-existence of ideas to produce conducive spaces. The consequential character of the space shows how the city can engage with its past, while still maintaining its urban pursuit.

The emblematic nature of buildings has caused cities across the world to be alike, exacerbating the lack of individual identity amongst themselves. In the pursuit for power, glass clad buildings have become omnipresent and relegated to being icons. The quality of the space within has become secondary and a tropical country populated with glass clad structures vouching for globalism seems rather inappropriate for its context.

Lee Kuan Yew had foreseen Singapore to be a garden city, and some architects have identified this as an opportunity to bring in threads of identity. Delving into the depths of Biophilia, the Solaris Office Complex by Ken Yeang tries to integrate the built environment with nature. The attempt to revive identity amongst buildings has manifested itself as a green ramp wrapping around a building of cascading green terraces. Complete with a package of active sustainable features, the iconic structure aimed at altering the path of urban structures in Singapore.

On a similar note, the Oasis by WOHA is an example of integrating green spaces with the built. The name being symbolic of its role in the city centre, the Oasis was conceived as a

green respite from the neighbouring buildings. Conceptualised as a tower in which green, communal spaces are carved into, a red, second skin screen wraps around the building, creating an enclosure of sorts. The resulting building seems to be a self-sufficient system that turns to ecology and climate to help convert spaces to places.

Both the Solaris and the Oasis have looked at weaving green spaces as a part of their built. However, adding pockets of foliage to the glass skyscraper neither addresses the issue of climate nor identity at its roots, becoming meek solutions to an identity crisis. For Singapore's climatic conditions, the use of glass buildings becomes more energy intensive. A large amount of active climate control is now needed for a city that used to build climatically relevant structures. The search for progress has left the country tangled in the web of time, unclear of its way forward.

The pursuit of iconic structures has made Singapore a canvas for innovative architecture. What Singapore needs however, is architecture that allows the city to reinvent itself without forsaking its context or the concerns of density and economics. While density still requires buildings to rise high, how do we tie ourselves to our context? How does one maintain social diversity and the heterogeneous culture of Singapore while still seeking to be a global city? "Supertall buildings of enormous scale and mixed uses may be better understood as self-contained cities in a global context instead of buildings in an urban context". [A] The scale of such skyscrapers forces it to be looked at in isolation and despite their iconic stature, they contribute to the placelessness of the city.

"Meanwhile, critical regionalism ideas tried to balance between International Style anonymity and local identity, without considering that the parameter of height over high-rise buildings could potentially become a powerful tool for expressing the national identity." [B] An example to illustrate the integration of the two theories would be the The Interlace by OMA architects. The complex is an instance of breaking away from the stereotypical vertical towers that are cut off from the ground plane. By piling up 31 lateral cuboidal masses irregularly, the massiveness of a tower is broken down into smaller masses of a relatable scale. While the concerns of density and iconic nature are addressed, the green terraces forge intermediate ground planes, humanising the scale of the spaces to a considerable extent. The building cleverly uses its height and form to mark its presence, yet not succumbing to the placelessness of its towered counterparts.

In the race for global prominence, Singapore has only chosen to see part of its reflection. The city reflects an architecture of exclusion, ignoring ties to its past. It is now left with fragments of its cultural identity, obscured by the homogeneity of modern buildings. A macroscopic understanding of balancing its past with its contemporary spaces is vital for the duality to thrive. Buildings also have the power to re-invent the identity of a city. For a city that could bring itself from the depths of despair to become a beacon of hope, reinventing its identity comes naturally. The way forward needs one to introspect and find regional solutions to balance identity and the notion of progress. Maybe the time has come for the city to pause, gauge its reflection from its own glass clad walls and decide its path for a better tomorrow.

References:

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- B - Zahiri, N.; Dezhdar, O.; Foroutan, M. Rethinking of Critical Regionalism in High-Rise Buildings. *Buildings* 2017, 7, 4.
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