

## Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism

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Against the backdrop of the Bauhaus centenary in 2019, *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* examined the history, significance, and future of postcolonial modernism in this region, with partners in four cities – Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Singapore, and Yangon. The project provided a historical perspective on the societal and political upheaval that accompanied the transition to independence after the colonial period in these countries. It also showcased current initiatives in the fields of art, architecture, and science that are committed to the preservation and use of Modernist buildings. In 2020, the project will continue with an exhibition and accompanying program in Berlin.

The Bauhaus centenary was celebrated in Germany with great enthusiasm and hundreds of activities. It can still be an inspiration, it seems, especially when considering its ideas in relation to the societal and political context in which it existed. *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* (*Encounters*), initiated by the authors and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office as part of these celebrations, took the situation of political and societal upheaval in which the Bauhaus existed as its point of departure. After WWI, the Bauhaus contributed to the aesthetic and architectural program of the new democratic state of the Weimar Republic with its agenda of social reforms and liberal politics. After WWII, the Bauhaus and the architectural concepts of Modernism served as models for reconstruction and new beginnings in Germany.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a new era was also beginning in many Southeast Asian countries, as the colonies and protectorates of France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands gained their independence. The young states were faced with the task of establishing themselves as nations and defining their own identity in an international context. Accompanying their efforts was often the desire to express this new beginning through architecture and urban planning. Many countries saw in international Modernism a contemporary form that reflected their hopes for progress and prosperity and at the same time signaled emancipation from colonial rule. Buildings, public squares, and entire neighborhoods were designed by local architects, some of whom were trained in the West, by European planners who maintained postcolonial networks, and also by architects from the Soviet Union, China, and other Asian countries.

Regional Modernist styles emerged, which harmonized the design ideas of a universal Modernism with specific cultural references, building traditions, and the climatic challenges of building in the tropics.

Today, many of these structures are considered insignificant and obsolete, have been destroyed or are threatened with demolition. Likewise, Southeast Asian Modernism is not present in relevant Western works on architectural history.<sup>1</sup> Although the former colonial powers have occasionally addressed architecture in these countries, the focus has mainly been on their own (European) architectural heritage.

In the region itself, however, a lively discourse on Modernism and Modernity has developed in recent years,<sup>2</sup> which attempts to overcome Western-oriented historiography and to describe a “non-West Modernist past.”<sup>3</sup> With a few exceptions, this discourse is relatively unknown in Europe. *Encounters* therefore aimed to increase its visibility and to strengthen the discussion. What can past architectural solutions contribute to meeting the challenges of the present, and how are Modernist works being evaluated today? Can Modernist ideas still serve as reference? How can their acknowledged achievements be brought into the current discourse – or how can such a discourse be initiated and accompanied?

*Encounters* addressed both a specialist audience and a broader, culturally interested public. A major goal was to “popularize” existing knowledge and to foster the dialogue between regions and disciplines – with visual artists, filmmakers, architects, photographers, curators, activists, teachers, and students. The cities of Phnom Penh, Jakarta, Singapore, and Yangon, which represent very different

scenarios in their discontinuous history, also open up references to developments in other Asian countries.

The project<sup>4</sup> launched in August 2019 in Berlin. A symposium brought together the regional curators, further international speakers, and the Berlin audience to discuss the history and presence of Modernism in Southeast Asia for the first time in Germany.

“Southeast Asian Modernism Spaces” (SEAM Spaces) formed the heart of the project in the four cities between October and December 2019. Each SEAM Space was developed and run by local curators. This resulted in very different exhibitions and events, which in their diversity reflected the specific situation in the participating cities. Contributions from the other cities complemented the exhibitions. There were presentations, lectures, interviews, discussions, film screenings, and architectural tours. Representatives of the German embassies and local branches of the Goethe Institute – Germany’s cultural institute – took part in the dialogue.

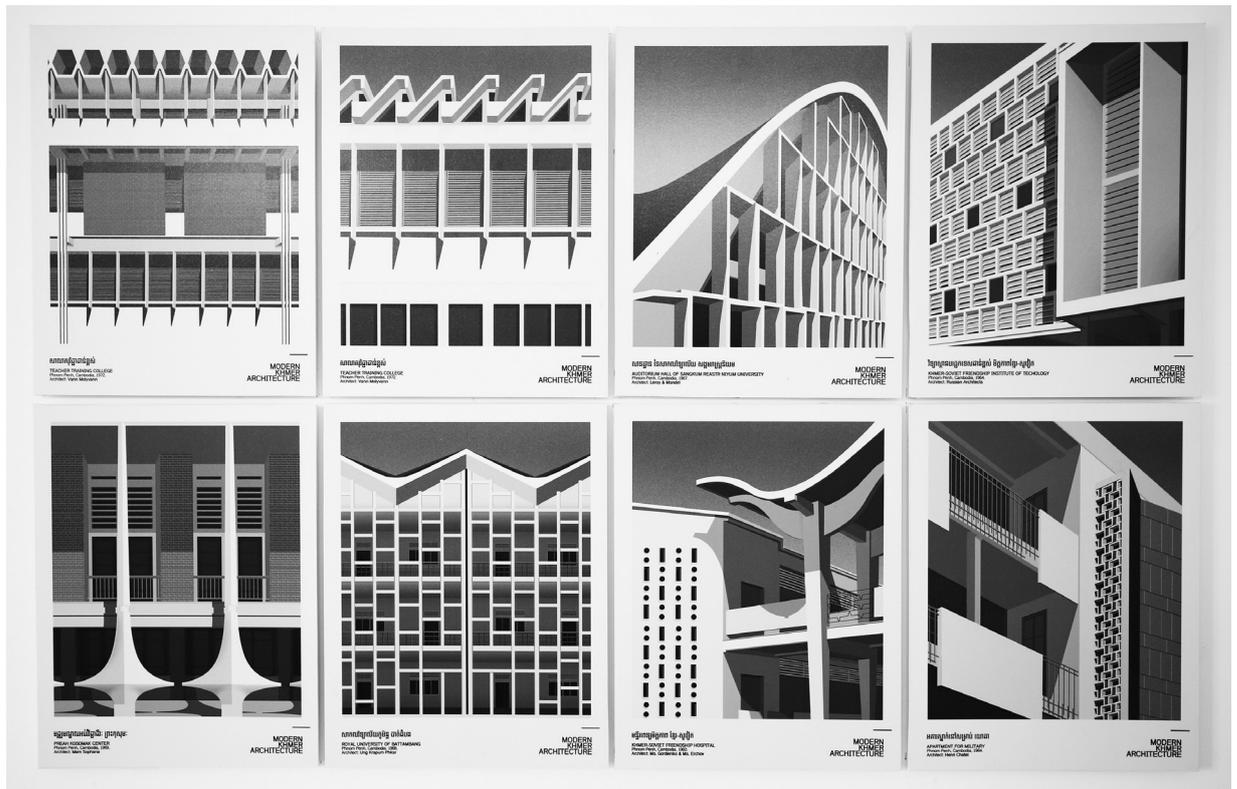
### Folding Concrete

The program in Southeast Asia started on 10<sup>th</sup> October in Cambodia’s capital with *Folding Concrete*. The contribution was curated by Pen Sereypagna, an architect, independent researcher, and director of the Vann Molyvann Project, together with Vuth Lyno, an artist, curator, and artistic director at Sa Sa Art Projects. The title refers to the characteristic folded structures that have become a landmark of New Khmer architecture. It also refers to the variety of disciplines such as art, culture, architecture, urbanism, industry and technology, from which Cambodian Modernities have developed. The venue that hosted most of the activities and the exhibition, was an apartment in a typical 1960s apartment building in the city’s Chinese quarter. The unconventional location reflected the fact that Phnom Penh does not have many spaces available for urban discourse. And the large number of visitors, among them many young people, showed all the more how important places of common cultural exchange are.

While architecture and urbanism were the main focus of the exhibition, overlaps with the fields of art and visual culture were also highlighted. Drawings from archives, research projects, and artworks revealed the richly textured architectural and cultural language that helped to shape and was also shaped by Cambodian Modernism.

A large part of the projects on display was based on the work of initiatives, artists, and young architects, many of whom have been addressing the heritage of Modernism independently. One such example is the Rongkon Project, initiated by a group of young architects and architecture students.

01 A visit to Tripitaka Library by architect Benjamin Polk was part of the program in Yangon. © Photo: Moritz Henning.



02 Poum Measbandol's graphics at the exhibition Folding Concrete in Phnom Penh. © Photo: Moritz Henning.



03 Housing Modernities in Singapore showed posters, videos, installations, and architectural models. © Photo: Moritz Henning.



04 The exhibition *Occupying Modernism*. © Photo: William Sutanto.



05 The Encounters team and curators at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, from left to right: Shirley Surya, Eduard Kögel, Berlin, Annika Schmidt, Moritz Henning, Win Thant Win Shwin, Christian Hiller, Avianti Armand, Vuth Lino, Pwint, Pen Sereypagna, Setiadi Sopandi, Sally Below, Johannes Widodo, Puay-peng Ho.  
© Photo: Anonymous stroller.

Since film culture has never really recovered from the devastations that the Khmer Rouge inflicted on the country, almost all historic cinemas have been demolished in recent years too. Against this backdrop, the project aims to explore and document cinemas and film culture of the 1960s in Cambodia. The work of Poum Measbandol, whose exquisite graphics sharpen the view on the details of Khmer Modernism, or the activities by artists and architects in and around the iconic White Building, an apartment complex built in 1963 and demolished in 2017, documenting the life of its inhabitants as well as the building itself in order to protect them from eviction and demolition, are further examples.

In view of the enormous real estate boom, which has particularly affected the capital Phnom Penh for some years now, those civil society initiatives seem all the more important. While at least some respect is gradually being paid to the architectural heritage of the former colonial power France, there is still little awareness of the value of the post-colonial “Architecture of independence”. Many valuable buildings have already been lost, and even the everyday architecture of this period, which still shapes the cityscape is gradually disappearing. If buildings are preserved and continue to be used, this is usually done on the initiative of private owners for whom the value of building culture outweighs profit.

### Occupying Modernism

At the second location, Jakarta, the topic of Modernism was examined in two parts. One part was curated by Setiadi Sopandi and Avianti Armand, both curators and architectural scholars who have made fundamental contributions to the perception of historical Modern architecture and Contemporary architecture in Indonesia, well beyond the country’s own borders.<sup>5</sup> For *Encounters* they teamed up with Rifandi S. Nugroho, curator and editor of *arsitekturindonesia.org*. Their

exhibition *Occupying Modernism*, which opened on 24<sup>th</sup> October at Kopi Manyar, a café, co-working space, and gallery, designed and owned by the architect Andra Matin, was a reflection on how Indonesians have rendered the spaces of Modern architecture.

The curators invited contributors from the fields of art, literature, and design<sup>6</sup> to explore Modernist buildings in Jakarta, comment on them artistically, and reinterpret them from a sociopolitical perspective. In the exhibition, historical floor plans, drawings, and photographs were juxtaposed with the highly sensual, critical, and humorous perspectives by the contributors on eight selected buildings, including Istiqlal Mosque, the National Monument, architect Friedrich Silaban’s Residence, and Hotel Indonesia Roundabout.

The second part was a contribution by ruangrupa and Gudskul, curated by Grace Samboh. *Visualisation of the National History: From, by, and for whom?* included an archive exhibition that investigated the diorama-making process of Indonesia’s eminent sculptor Edhi Sunarso, which gave deep insight into the country’s “decreed” historiography after attaining independence. Accompanying the exhibition was a workshop that navigated the contemporary perception of the dioramas into curatorial practice. In a joint teaching and research process, students were asked to develop podcasts, which critically examined dioramas at the National Monument and offered alternative narratives about these. This contribution showed how the promise of Modernism, as expressed through urban planning and in the monument itself, was taken up in the selective narration of history by various governments.

### Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity

The third chapter of *Encounters* was presented at the villa of the Goethe-Institut in Yangon. The historical site played a key role in Bur-

mese general Aung San’s fight for independence.<sup>7</sup> For the exhibition *Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity*, opened on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019, the curators Pwint, Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Architecture at Yangon Technological University, and Win Thant Win Shwin, an architect, planner, and lecturer in the Department of Architecture at Mandalay Technological University, worked closely with the documentary filmmaker Kriz Chan Nyein and a team of young architects. The curatorial team from Berlin provided further contributions. An accompanying conference featured presentations by curators, artists, architects, and scholars on modern architecture and art and their intertwining with political, social, and cultural narratives.

More than 150 guests, among them students of architecture, artists, and architects, joined the opening of the exhibition and the conference – despite the challenges such a project has to face in Myanmar, as the curators explained:

*Questioning architecture and urban planning in Myanmar had fallen silent for decades. Now, after the newly forming of democracy, the interest in modern architecture is thriving again. A young generation of architects and scholars, as well as the general public, are asking about the historical significance and current value of the architectural heritage of this period. But in a multi-ethnic society, with a population that speaks hundreds of different dialects, the re-negotiation of Modern architecture and its values is a great challenge. Further, the interactions with religion, politics, and technology must be taken into account, as well as relating developments in the Southeast Asian region.*

Against this specific backdrop, *Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity* analyzed how Modernity was translated into an architectural language. Drawings and images examined the Modernist Tripitaka Library, Martyr’s Mausoleum, and Yangon Regional Parliament. The work Irene gave a more private view on Modern living in the 1960s and 1970s through photographs the artist Lukas Birk collected. The filmmaker Kriz Chan Nyein captured video interviews with eminent architects and artists as U Shwe, U Sun Oo, and U Win Pe.

Many of the guests pointed out that for them *Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity* was their first encounter with Yangon’s Modernism. Modernist buildings are also a blank spot in the country’s heritage protection law, which still only provides protection for buildings that are more than 100 years old. The efforts for the preservation of buildings, whether by the city, private initiatives or even the active Yangon Heritage Trust, focus almost exclusively on the architectural heritage of

the British colonial power, as does common literature – an astonishing fact, since these buildings also always represent exploitation and oppression.

### Housing Modernities

At the last destination of *Encounters*, the exhibition *Housing Modernities* explored the architecture of Modernism and its role in nation-building and the construction of a Singapore identity. This SEAM Space was conducted in partnership with the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. Ho Puay-peng, Professor and Head of the Department of Architecture at the NUS, curated the exhibition together with Associate Professor Johannes Widodo and Senior Lecturer Nikhil Joshi.

*Housing Modernities* was presented in the exhibition space of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which as Singapore's central planning organization is largely responsible for the preservation or demolition of buildings. With a focus on public housing, it demonstrated Singapore's path to Modernism, which was inextricably tied to nation-building, improving the lives of the citizens, and laying the foundation of a postcolonial modernized state. The exhibition explored relevant sub-themes such as master-planning and urban design of new housing estates, architectural form and lifestyle, everyday Modernism in community structures for daily needs, and domesticity and life in public housing estates.

The exhibition, provided insight into social and cultural modernization and illustrated the search for unique architectural expression liberated from colonial symbols. The artist Michael Lee conducted a workshop with local residents to explore their perspectives, and presented resulting objects, installations, and ideas. The bringing together of pleas for the preservation of identity-building structures from Singapore's young history with proposals for the conversion of such buildings and the views of residents in this exhibition will hopefully bring important voices into the further discourse on site.

As it is the case in most of the big cities of Southeast Asia, the increasing densification and the concomitant demolition do not stop at the icons of modern architecture, nor at the many modern residential buildings, the everyday architecture that has become for many inhabitants of Singapore the home and part of the post-colonial identity of the city. Despite many initiatives to preserve the heritage of modernity, and a growing awareness of this issue within the relevant institutions, it seems uncertain whether these buildings will be able to withstand the pressure.

At the closing event for *Encounters* in 2019, the issue of housing in Singapore was discussed, and the experiences with the SEAM Spaces in Phnom Penh, Jakarta, and Yangon were shared. The conference was held at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art upon kind invitation by its founding director, Ute Meta Bauer. With its cross-disciplinary approach, the NTU provided the backdrop for concluding thoughts. These included alternative perspectives on the narrative of Modernism, which shaped the period after independence with many promises, but which today, like its architectural testimonies, has been devalued by current trends in real estate development. The closing talk highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary and regional exchange. Each of the cities involved has its own unique history and narrative and reflects the state of the current discourse. But every place needs critical reappraisal and re-evaluation to anchor the cultural and architectural legacy in the here and now. Although each local story has its own special features, it is necessary to develop a mutual understanding that challenges the dominant Western perspective with its own unique approaches.

### Outlook

The positive reaction to the project, the active encouragement and enthusiasm with which all contributors worked to develop it, but also the many questions that remain open or, more often, arose, encouraged the initiators to continue with the project and also deepen the exchange between Germany, Europe, and the Southeast Asian countries. In order to share the ideas and findings of the regional projects with a wider public in Germany, the authors are therefore preparing *Contested Modernities*, a follow-up exhibition accompanied by an auxiliary program, for autumn 2020 in Berlin, based on the Southeast Asian contributions along with supplementary elements.

### Notes

- 1 Examples include Kenneth Frampton, *Die Architektur der Moderne*, Stuttgart, DVA, 1989, and Leonardo Benevolo, *Die Geschichte der Stadt*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1983.
- 2 See, for example, the activities of the mAAN ([www.m-aan.org](http://www.m-aan.org)) from 2000 to 2011 or the current Modern ASEAN Architecture (mASEANa) network ([www.maseana.iis.u-tokyo.ac.jp](http://www.maseana.iis.u-tokyo.ac.jp)), partly documented in *docomomo Journal* 57 – Modern Southeast Asia (2017/2).
- 3 Jiat-Hwee Chang and William Lim (eds.), *Non West Modernist Past: On Architecture and Modernities*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing Co., 2012.
- 4 See the full program and documentation at [www.seam-encounters.net](http://www.seam-encounters.net).
- 5 For example, their exhibition *Tropicality Revisited*, shown in 2015 at the German Architecture Museum (DAM) in Frankfurt, among other places, and their contribution *Craftsmanship: Material Consciousness at the 14<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennale* (2014).

- 6 The team was able to attract four outstanding personalities: Goenawan Mohamad (1941-) founded *Tempo* magazine, becoming one of Indonesia's most important intellectuals. His work combines journalism, poetry, visual arts, and political activism. Hikmat Darmawan (1970-) researches and works in the fields of comics, film, and pop culture. Cecil Mariani is an artist, designer, and cultural activist who deals, among other things, with collective forms of design practice and develops alternative economic models. Alvin Tjitrowirjo's work as a furniture designer focuses on research into handmade materials and local design knowledge.
- 7 From 1945 until the assassination of Aung San in 1947, the building was the headquarters of Burma's Anti-Fascist People's Liberation League. Although the villa's precise origins are unknown, it is known that it was acquired by a wealthy Chinese merchant in the early 1920s and was then abandoned in the turmoil of WWII. Later, the State Art Academy was located in the building until 2003. Cultural relations between Myanmar and Germany began in 1959 but were interrupted after Ne Win (1911-2002) took power in 1962. Once they were resumed, the villa was renovated and an expansion completed in 2018 to house the Goethe-Institut. Today, the premises with its garden and café is an invaluable oasis in dense and busy Yangon.

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### Christian Hiller

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### Eduard Kögel

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