An Asian Avant-garde: A Lexicon of Asian Modernity

"We observe the anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history, and we can account for it in terms of the subversive force of this new aesthetic consciousness. Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative. This revolt is one way to neutralize the standards of both morality and utility. […] On the other hand, the time consciousness articulated in avant-garde art is not simply ahistorical; it is directed against what might be called a false normativity in history. The modern, avant-garde spirit has sought to use the past in a different way, it disposes those pasts which have been made available by the objectifying scholarship of historicism, but it opposes at the same time a neutralized history which is locked up in the museum of historicism. […] In sum, the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be improverished through mere traditionalism."

Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity–An Incomplete Project,"

in Hal Foster, ed., The Anti-Aesthetic, 5 & 13.

H. KOON WEE
University of Hong Kong

At the heart of an argument for local modernism is an aesthetic and ahistorical impulse. Like Colin St John Wilson, Asian architect-theorist William S.W. Lim resurrects modernity as an architectural and cultural impetus for change by referring to it as being in a state of constant incompletion. Habermas also reminds us that the project of modernity is not freed from history, but it leads to the search for alternatives. In other words, the historical context of the avant-garde is essentially predicated on the alternative history of modernism.[1] The framework adopted for avant-garde positions is useful in teasing out the work of architects who operate on the thresholds. In the case of Lim, it is important to turn to his writings and a full lexicon of terms developed by him over the past five decades, rather than the obvious accomplishments of his architectural practice. While Rem Koolhaas was fascinated in the built projects of Lim, comparing it with the work of the Metabolist, he failed to discover the range of writings and theories by Lim that would have drawn his analysis even closer to the avant-garde positions of the Metabolists.[2] Lim's stance as a theorist-provocateur proves far more

nuanced and influential, and this short analysis aims to illuminate a number of these avant-garde positions in the formation of Asian modernism.

In understanding the validity of architectural discourses through theory and writing, one can also turn to the work of Michael Sorkin for a contrasting effect. The mutual affection between Michael Sorkin and Lim can be explained by a reversal of fortunes between these two unlikely heroes of critical writing. In Sorkin's 1991 book entitled *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings*, he blamed his circumstantial love for writing on the fact that it was impossible to practice architecture in the early 1970s in New York, because of the overly commercial and regressive modes of design.[3] Writing about architecture and the city was his only refuge. Lim, on the other hand, was blessed with a climate of ceaseless building and construction that was hungry for everything new. Writing had an opposite effect for Lim – it was a way of arresting the spate of incessant and often thoughtless construction and urbanization in the developing decades in Singapore and Malaysia. Since 1967 Lim has been advocating for a more equitable city, and since retiring from architectural practice in the 2000s, he has been furiously writing and organizing conferences in an effort to consolidate a position for an Asian modernity.

THE CONSTANCY OF MODERNITY: "NON-WEST MODERNIST PAST"

The condition of modernity is centered on newness itself. Hence the theory of the avant-garde would necessarily evolve into something yet newer. It was not surprising for historians and critics to continue to define and redefine new waves of the neo-avant-garde in art and architecture. Lim's formative years at the London Architectural Association and Harvard's Graduate School of Design would have meant that he was exposed to the height of high modernism in Europe and America, but it would also be safe to argue that this was exactly the period where the roles of the avant-garde in society would be called into question. Lim has no direct affinity or interest in the avant-garde, nor does he consider himself neo-avant-garde. However, throughout his writings, he was cognizant of the power of modernity and its expression in Modern architecture. The language and discourse of modernity is positioned at such a high and abstract plane in architecture, it is often difficult to grasp and articulate.

Lim was part of a group of student participants present at the 1953 CIAM 9 meeting at Aix-en-Provence in France. This was the first time younger members of the future Team 10 would openly challenge the validity of the core values of CIAM.[4] At the meeting, Lim would witness Peter and Alison Smithson openly challenged CIAM's highly segregated and functional zoning of the Functional City, consolidated and heavily advocated by Le Corbusier since the CIAM 4 meeting in Greece in 1933. Apart from the Smithsons, who had taught Lim at the AA, CIAM 9 was also attended by Lim's other teachers, such as William Howell, and his future teacher at Harvard Jaqueline Tyrwhitt. The demise of Modernism was to dramatically unfold, and Lim's immediate education would be to question the expression of Modernism in Europe at the height of Le Corbusier's influence. Writing about modernity, Lim uses the terms "multiple modernities," querying the just how much different cultures share in their search for change and progress.

Lim's reference to post-colonial literature and theories aligns himself with a tradition that seeks change and progress in the face of power. This translates into a kind of scholarship and advocacy that permeates through the last two decades of his writings. The specific operative term was the descriptor "Asian" in the title of as many as six of his fifteen books since 1990. Lim celebrates the work
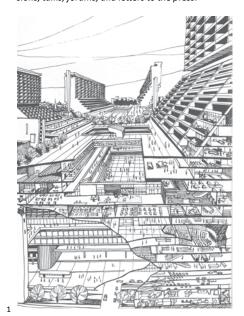
MULTIPLE MODERNITIES (2012)

Modernity is understood by the West as a process of historical transformation that took place in Europe and later in the United States. The new culture that evolved encompasses concepts of freedom, human rights and individuality as well as the rule of law. Opportunism as well as faith in Western modernity fuelled the belief that all cultures should be made in the image of the West. This surge in confidence was brought about by the advent of superior technology and economic development. Eurocentric modernity was the justification for civilizing missions towards the non-Western other as well as aggressive colonial conquests and numerous imperial undertakings.

Lim, Asian Ethical Urbanism: A Radical Postmodern Perspective, 6.

of Edward Said in resisting mainstream scholarship that assumed a Eurocentric foundation. Similarly, like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other theorists of post-colonial literature,[5] Lim seeks to question the very center of knowledge production and historiography. In contributing to two authoritative texts on the history of architecture of East[6] and Southeast Asia, Lim recalls the powerful discourses of CIAM and the Bauhaus, but he considered them marginal at best.[7] Lim persists in describing the problems and potentials of modernity on specifically Asian terms, inventing terminologies and definitions, and generating discourses. This culminated in the significant Non-West Modernist Past Conference in 2012, where discourses from multiple cultures were represented.[8] The convoluted title itself reveals the immeasurable struggle with the complexity of the histories and multiplicities of the theme.

THE OUTSIDER: "ASIAN ALTERITY"

At the heart of the Smithsons's critique of CIAM was the question of identity and possibility for the city to play a greater role in enabling its inhabitants. The Smithsons "Urban Reidentification" grid was a city that embodied more relationships between its constituents. They later expanded this into a question of scale, proposing a "scale of association" by the CIAM 10 meeting as the new form of clustering in an urban habitat, in a direct recall of Patrick Geddes's "Valley Section."[9] Like the Smithsons, who had looked more closely at the disparity and complexity of urban life in London, and had been able to propose more sensitized pattern of correlation, Lim was trying to make sense of the chaotic Asian cities that surrounded him. Lim's teacher Tyrwhitt consolidated this interest in identity in an edited volume[10] borne out of her own research work as an exchange professor at the University of Tokyo in 1967.[11]

This sensitivity was perhaps a reaction to what Lim describes as an "over-regulated Singapore,"[12] and compounded by his inability to enter into mainstream governance of the city. Rem Koolhaas came to describe Singapore as "Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis, or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa,"[13] in 1995 after interviews with two key figures of Singapore's architectural and urban scene – the insider Liu

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Figure 1: (R) Future of Asian Cities, 1965, *SPUR 65-7.*

Figure 2: (L) Woh Hup Complex, 1974.

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Thai Ker, just retired back in 1992 from civil service after four years as the Chief Planner and CEO of Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority and fourteen years as the Chief Architect and CEO of the Housing Development Board, and the complete outsider, Lim.

Lim's mode of practice was to run a parallel race alongside the nation-building efforts of the government of Singapore, without crossing the threshold into mainstream policy-making. In the year of Singapore independence from Malaysia, Lim formed the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), interrogating "aspects of planning which are urgent in Singapore," namely, "rent decontrol, structure of decision making in physical planning, urban renewal, transportation, and public housing." The groups sought a more civic form of exchange and citizenry participation, before it was dissolved in 1974.[14]

By the time Tyrwhitt met up with Lim in Singapore in 1960[15] since Harvard, former SPUR member Tan Jake Hooi had become the Chief Planning Officer of Singapore. After SPUR, Lim continued to form alternative groups and think-tanks, in an effort to continue his intellectual activities and the discourse on urbanism. In the mid-60s, Lim formed the Asian Planning and Architecture Collaboration (APAC) with Charles Correa, Tao Ho, Sumet Jumsai, Koichi Nagashima and Fumihiko Maki. Maki noted that "all the group members were not particularly closely allied to the power centers in their respective countries", hence its intellectual and professional discourse was even more critical in shaping up their careers to come.[16] In 1993, Lim registered the AA Asia as an alumni group of the Architectural Association London to pursue architectural discourse and design excellence in the spirit of the AA. In 1986, Lim became the first elected Chairman of the Singapore Heritage Society,[17] an NGO that preceded the government's own National Heritage Board by 7 years. The latest in line is Asian Urban Lab, founded in 2003 with sociologist Sharon Siddique, to address multi-disciplinary research in contemporary urban issues.

Asian Alterity was the third publication to have emerged from conferences and workshops led by Asian Urban Lab, and it is by far the most ambitious. The notion of alterity was used not only to evoke an alternative discourse of urbanism, but it invokes the post-colonial "otherness." According to one of the commentators, this post-colonial complex recalls two references, namely, "Europe-America, or the generic 'West' and globalization."[18] The discourses of this conference essentially had to position Asian sensibilities and histories on its own terms, but it also suggests that such Asian characteristics have become alternatives unto itself, no longer predicated on Western thought and practices. Each Asian city case study seeks out alternative solutions based on its own histories and problems.

THE IMPOSSIBLE URBAN SCALE: "INCOMPLETE URBANISM"

Recalling Lim's specific mode of inquiry of an architect and theorist, it appears that it was not possible for the practice of urbanism and architecture to intersect. Though Lim himself would argue to the contrary, that there are direct connections between his writings and architectural practice, or what was termed "periods of creativity." He referred to three moments of connections, firstly the nationalist fervor and intellectual debates of SPUR coincided with People's Park and Golden Mile Complex, secondly the redefinition of regionalism in the form of Contemporary Vernacular was linked to the design and issues surrounding the Reuters House, and lastly Spaces of Indeterminacy was developed from the design projects of Marine Parade Community Club and Gallery Hotel.[19] Despite

ASIAN ALTERITY (2008)

There is a unique Asian vibrancy that needs to be understood and it is no longer satisfactory to treat Asia merely as a geographical entity based on conventional definition. In defining a radical perspective on Asia's social characteristics, let me quote a leading intellectual in China, Wang Hui: "In this perspective, what makes Asia Asia is not any cultural essence abstracted from Confucianism or any other type of civilization, but rather the special position of Asian countries in the capitalist world-system. This special position is not produced by a structural narrative of world capitalism, but by a dynamic analysis of the class composition and historical traditions internal to Asian society."

In a world of multiple modernities where there is a constant reconstitution of traditions and negotiation of cultural differences, the demand to formulate a culturally-specific human rights discourse, independent of Western paradigm, in a region with distinct philosophical and pluralistic religious traditions has been unabated.

Lim, Asian Alterity: With Special Reference to Architecture + Urbanism through the Lens of Cultural Studies, 38 & 70-1.

DEFINING & IMPLEMENTING INCOMPLETE URBANISM (2012)

Incomplete urbanism is a dynamic hybridized interactive strategy grown out from the remarkable avant-garde urban experiments of post-planning, and the critical lessons from the utopian Eco-city syndrome of the last decade as well as from the urgent need to search for a viable alternative planning instrument while contesting the current rigid hierarchical urban practices characterized by overwhelming order and control – of what Richard Sennett called 'The Closed System and the Brittle City'.

The state of incompleteness must always be in the making and is a vital evolving element that allows for continuous unforeseen changes and unplanned growth. It must not be equated with the negative connotation of the unfinished. It's main characteristics of indeterminancy, inconsistency and change-ability are vital ingredients to open most options for future actions. [...] The major agenda of Incomplete Urbanism is to challenge present urban theories and practices. Key issues [include] tall buildings, urban forms, transport, chaos and vibrancy, and ethics and spatial justice.

Lim, Incomplete Urbanism: A Critical Urban Strategy for Emerging Economies, 61 & 70.

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these links, Lim was not able to participate in mainstream governmental policy-making. Given Singapore government's rigid restrictions and decision-making processes, Lim's vision of citizenry participation was never possible. It remains true that Lim was able to theorize about the city, but never actually practice these ideas, or bring them towards a policy of change. It never came within Lim's domain of influence.

However, apart from these circumstantial moments of connections and inspiration, one might look at the same debate that Lim grew up with at the GSD at Harvard. Josep Lluís Sert's new Urban Design program never truly merged with the issues of design and the design practice of architecture because it demanded so much more than the problems architecture could solve. At any rate, the tension was originally between departments of architecture and landscape architecture, where the latter program encompassed city planning.[20] There was an uncanny reversal of the sequence of history in Lim's exposure to the different attitudes towards the city, as he would be taught by the younger generation of the London County Council architects of William Howell and John Killick[21],w here the former served as CIAM's younger generation of architects alongside the Smithsons.[22] The new ethics of collectivity and connectedness brought on by these British architects and Team 10 would inform Lim of his first built projects, as he went in search for a technologically relevant method of construction, as well as a appropriate typology of architecture. Lim went on to apply his knowledge in collective housing honed from the fourth year design competition he had won with Keith Pimm at the AA directly to his first significant project in the form of the People's Park Complex. Lim's awareness of the work of the Team X architects Van de Broek and Bakema and others during the 1955 Congress of the International Union of Architects at the Hague would reinforce his belief in an urbanistic typology in architecture.[23] Lim would encounter Sert's retreat from CIAM and the European

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Figure 3 (R) De Lijnbaan Shopping Center, Rotterdam by Van den Broek & Bakema, 1953.
Figure 4 (L) People's Park Complex, 1972.

scene at the GSD. In fact, Lim would learn more directly from a number of notable CIAM colleagues Tyrwhitt and Sigfried Giedion. By this time, the ideas about the CIAM's original version of the Functional City would evolve at Harvard to include less simplistic and humanistic questions of the human scale[24] and interdisciplinarity – "a more complete knowledge of human needs."[25]

By the time Lim arrived at the GSD in 1956, Sert was organizing the first Urban Design Conference. Lim was introduced to the lectures of Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Lewis Mumford, Charles Abram, and even Robert Moses. He would take classes directly with Charles M. Haar from the Harvard Law School who specializes in the revitalization of inner city urban problems, and Lloyd Rodwin, co-founder of the MIT-Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies who was renowned for his research and analysis of urban problems in developing regions. Lim's exposure to the marginal aspects of a developing society and the urban poor during these encounters at the GSD charged him with a specific role of advocacy upon his return to Singapore at a time when there was a great deal of political and economic instability. To date, most of his books are dedicated to "the millions of urban poor in the Asian emerging economies who deserve an equitable share of the development benefits." The ruling regime's decision to approach its national and urban development in a highly controlled and hard-handed manner would prove to be the perfect counterpoint to Lim's sensibilities. On one hand, Lim's SPUR was clearly frustrated at not being influential in effecting governmental policies, but on the other hand, it granted Lim greater freedom to theorize within an idealized, arguably neo-avant-garde position. In fact, without the real tension of what Lim described as "the many frustrating years of official harassment,"[26] he may not have developed five decades of writings of resistance. Powell observes, "Lim's involvement in these [radical intellectual] activities undoubtedly had repercussions on his professional work." Lim confirms, "I may have had more projects from the government if I had not taken the position that I did. But, then again, if you have fewer jobs, in the strange shift of the game, it gives more space for reading, research, and intellectual activity. That is the professional price one pays."[27] Interestingly enough, the terms of Incomplete Urbanism is actually practice-based, evident in the second part of the book, where it carefully describes the urban strategy.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: AUTONOMY: "CREATIVE REBELLIOUSNESS"

The formation of avant-garde ideals may ultimately be dehumanizing, as Sert and Tyrwhitt discovered in the uprising of the young members of Team 10, and in the dissolution of CIAM. Lim concurs that the "dominant mindsets of the grand modernist narratives are unable to solve today's complex and ethically inspired challenges."[28] The autonomy of art, and by extension architecture, so sought after by cutting edge artists and architects has its origins in "the rise of bourgeois society and the seizure of political power by a bourgeoisie that had gained economic strength, thus a systematic aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and a new concept of autonomous art come into being."[29] This simply translates to the fact that Lim cannot be absorbed into mainstream governmental practice, otherwise his work will lose its appeal as avant-garde positions. Hence, Lim offers perpetual creativity as a mode of practice.

The search for urban discourses and theories that originate within Asian sociopolitical and urban contexts in the twentieth century gives meaning to the five decades of Lim's critical writings about urbanism, architecture and culture. These

CREATIVE REBELLIOUSNESS (2002)

The actions of creative rebelliousness challenge the value systems and lifestyles of the mainstream establishment as well as its holistic cultural, social and religious norms.

To be rebelliously creative is a high-risk undertaking. The process is very stressful and often irrational. It generates self-doubts and uncertainty. Success can never be assured, and failure is frequent. Where the price of failure is high and the rebellious alternatives are considered threats or a nuisance by the establishment, the rebellious spirit is severely curtailed and compromised.

The establishments in Singapore and in other Asian countries are well aware of the urgent necessity for painful adjustments in order to promote the spirit of creative rebelliousness and more 'out-of-the-box' innovative ideas.

Being contemporary and rebellious is part of life's experiences and everyone is determined to participate in it. However, their full expression in many instances has to be compromised. The young often have to act under great stress, schizophrenically, during this period of transition.

Lim, "Creative Rebelliousness and the Aesthetics of the Postmodern," Postmodern Singapore, 6-9.

ENDNOTES

1. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde," in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, vii-xv.

2. Koolhaas, "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis, or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa," *S, M, L, XL*, 1008-30.

3. Sorkin, *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings,* 1-5.

4. Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960,* 225-238.

5. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics.*

6. Lim, "The dynamics of East Asian New Urbanism," in Hubert-Jan Henket & Hilde Heynen, eds., *Back from Utopia: The Challenge of the Modern Movement*, 198-205.

7. Lim, "Introductory Essay – Southeast Asia: From Nowhere to Somewhere and Beyond," in Lim & Jennifer Taylor eds., *World Architecture 1900-200: A Critical Mosaic, Volume 10: Southeast Asia and Oceania*, XXI.

8. H. Koon Wee, "Pluralism & the End of the Avant-Garde," *Singapore Architect Issue #268*, 166-9.

9. Alison and Peter Smithson, The Charged Void: Urbanism, 24-31. Also, see Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse,* 239-241.

10. Gwen Bell & Tyrwhitt, eds., *Human Identity in the Urban Environment.*

11. Jane Collings, "Series 9: Papers relating to Tyrwhitt's work in Tokyo. at the University of Singapore and at the University of Hawaii. 1964-1972," *The Jaqueline Tyrwhitt Papers,* British Architectural Library Manuscripts Collection

12. Lim & Hsia Chu-Joe, "Spaces of Heterotopias / Indeterminacy," in Miyake Akiko & Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds., *Bridge the Gap?,* 379.

13. Koolhaas, "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis, or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa," 1015.

14. Robert Powell, Inciting Rebellion," *No Limits: Articulating William Lim,* 26.

15. "Box 38: Report on Visit to Singapore," Jaq*ueline Tyrwhitt Papers*, RIBA Archives, Victoria & Albert Museum.

16. Powell, "Inciting Rebellion," *No Limits: Articulating William Lim,* 21. Originally cited in Maki, "Contemporary Asian Architecture," *Process Architecture No. 20,* 1980, 10-11. Maki also wrote that "the matchmaker of this small group of young Asian architects was the late Jaqueline Tyrwhitt. She felt there should be some kind of forum among Asian architects, a place where their views on urbanism could be exchanged and heard."

17. Ibid. 34.

18. Chua Beng Huat, "Asian Alterity: Insistence and Desire," *Asian Alterity: Part II, Case Studies of Asian Cities*, 4-5.

19. Lim's interview with Powel. See Powell, "Inciting Rebellion," 40.

20. Anthony Alofsin, *The Struggle for Modernism: Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and City Planning at Harvard*, 40-3.

21. John Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern architects and urban transformation, 1954-1972,* 25 & 49.

22. Gold, *The Experience of Modernism: Modern architects and the future city*, 1928-53, 219.

23. W.S.W. Lim and A.F. Rutter, "Undertones: Reflections on the 1955 I.U.A. Congress," *AA Journal,* 1955, 107-8.

24. Eric Mumford, *Defining Urban Design: CIAM Architects and the Formation of a Discipline, 1937-69*, 113, 135.

25. Alofsin, *The Struggle for Modernism,* 251-2.

26. Book Dedication to his wife Cheng U Wen Lena at the first pages of the book: Lim, *Architecture, Art, Identity in Singapore: Is there Life after Tabula Rasa.*

27. Powell, "Inciting Rebellion," 27.

28. Lim, "Creative Rebelliousness and the Aesthetics of the Postmodern," in Lim, ed., *Postmodern Singapore,* 6.

29. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* 41-2.

two aspects demonstrate the friction between a uniting claim for a unique Asian discourse, one that staves off a largely Euro-American dominated discourse in urban history and theory, and an insistence that there is a special space for the genius of an Avant-garde architect-theorist, operating within specific histories and constraints of his city. Should time permit, there are at least three to four more critical strands and coined terms that can be included, namely, the break with tradition in Lim's "contemporary vernacular" (1998), the allegorical effect of Lim's "spaces of indeterminancy" (2001), the montage effect or fragmentary reality of "fuzzy urbanism" (1996) and "active rememories" (2002), and the more recent ideologically grounded "spatial justice" (2005).

It is perhaps easier to see Lim's work as a subset of a broader trajectory of the history of urbanism in Asia. However, as the nature and influence of Lim's writings reveal themselves in a more collective manner, it is more effective to establish a link between Lim's work and the discourse of urbanism in Asia – that is to cast Lim as an avant-garde figure in the midst of the developmental stages of new nations in Asia in the postwar wave of de-colonization, and various civil rights and democratic movements. Inadvertently, Lim became the surrogate voice for Asian urbanism for the English-speaking world.