

Larry Ford

Architectural Mega-Projects in Asia: New City Images and New City Form

The production of downtown space and globalization has dealt primarily with capital flow, communication networks, and business transactions -- not how businesses must be housed in increasingly sophisticated buildings. There is a growing discussion of this topic in popular architectural publications however.

The focus of this paper and talk is the production of new office buildings and districts and the impact that they are having on urban form and the spatial organization of cities.

Cities need major office buildings, first-class hotels, and modern shipping facilities, as well as improved infrastructures and housing, but there is also a fascination in Asia with having the newest, fanciest, tallest, largest, and most modern and innovative buildings and landscapes in the world.

There is some irony in the adoption of what many describe as the quintessential symbol of American capitalism -- the skyscraper. The rise of Asian skylines represent more than a practical necessity, it is a very important ideological leap.

The twin Petronas Towers of Kuala Lumpur, presently the two tallest twin buildings in the world, provide perhaps the best example of using the skyscraper as both a symbol of participation in the new global economy and as a symbol of unique cultural identity. When the design competition was announced, there were two important requirements that had to be met. It had to be the tallest project in the world and it had to include Islamic design elements.

Cities often seek work famous architects in order to obtain not only the best possible building but also a vast amount of publicity in the international press and architectural journals as the project progresses. But the diffusion of architectural expertise is not leading to simple global homogenization. The whole remains subject to local exigencies and the constraints of physical site. But there are problems associated with the increasing use of global architects. Chief among them is the possible lack of sensitivity to local conditions. By introducing grandiose architecture based on western technologies, imagery, and occupancy patterns, foreign architects may be guilty of encouraging cities to build structures that they do not really need, cannot use effectively, and cannot maintain adequately. The projects may also serve to draw capital away from needed social programs in the area of housing, street repair or water supply.

When it comes to choosing locations to build spaces to house the new global economy, most Asian cities have two choices -- the existing downtown or nearby and convenient "midtowns." There are basically two types of midtowns in Asian cities. They are either reclaimed and/or sanitized water front zones or formerly residential/commercial areas. Midtowns have become the locations for some of the biggest and most impressive architectural projects in the world. Midtown are between the CBD and the suburbs. They're a hybrid.

In spite of the massive changes in major Asian cities, there have been few public outcries about the loss of historically and socially significant settings. Only Kyoto and Singapore have preservation program. In Singapore it was the result of declining tourism revenues. To a very real degree, historic preservation may be just one more example of landscape globalization. Big name international architects have become increasingly involved in preservation and rehabilitation.

The image of Asian cities is changing from anachronistic and backward to gleaming skylines. The skyscraper and architecture in general is an essential part of this changing image.

These new types of buildings are also changing Asian streets. Plazas are becoming more common which aren't traditionally Asian. New districts are sometimes created by building skyscrapers and used as a means to identify the new area.

Questions, Answers and Comments

Q: Are there alternatives to the North American skyscraper for these cities?

A: I was fascinated with Indonesian traditional architectural forms in oversized versions to create office complexes. But I'm not sure they're always appropriate because if they become much larger than traditional buildings, they become cartoonish. Mid-rise or low-rise buildings would be an option, but they don't have enough pizzazz.

Q: Even though Indonesia has a long history of foreign influences, the hybrid nature of the high-rises is overstating it. They learn western architecture, and very little of their own history. They really are a bit like cartoons.

A: Yes, I did exaggerate the hybrid nature a bit. Most high-rises are pretty standard. In Indonesia, hotels are closer to hybrids -- they tried to incorporate Javanese architecture. This isn't so with government or university buildings. Hybrids will be a long time coming.

Q: What has been the relative success or failure of these high-rises regarding occupancy and public acceptance?

A: In terms of occupancy, they haven't fared very well. But we shouldn't judge too quickly. We have to wait -- people are still sorting out about how to use the new spaces.

Q: You paint a bleak picture of historic preservation. Who isn't building high-rises?

A: Historic preservation is difficult in many places because the cities were under built with one-storey buildings in the first place. And the Chinese in particular aren't known for their sentimentality when it comes to property values.

Q: You haven't talked about the displacement factor.

A: Well, in some cases it's just done. Usually there isn't much public discussion about it. People are just moved. Of course, we're guilty of the same thing -- Boston, being a famous case of it. It's not a new phenomenon.

Q: Back to the image of the non-highest buildings. Most are an architectural free-for-all. There are no technical or policy constraints on any of the buildings. So how does one make a statement or create an image as a developer under those circumstances?

A: In Malaysia there are some buildings that they say are Malay. Some are built with more traditional forms -- shading, less air conditioning, etc. and they have published books on what a Malay building should be, but when it comes to building a downtown skyscraper, it just doesn't work. And you're right, it is a free-for-all of famous foreign architects making a statement. They want something from someplace else brought in.

Q: But how is that longing produced? How do we know that people want this? And what is the role of newspapers and other media to produce it? What evidence is there that local people want this?

A: There are the obvious sources -- television, architectural journals, movies, Newsweek, etc. I was hoping that this would not be true, but as we interviewed architects, it became clear that clients kept saying that they want one like Chicago has. Traveling and conventions is often an important dimension -- travel individually or by group. They want a Sears Tower like they saw in Chicago.

Q: From my experience in China, I hope/think that people still want something Chinese about their buildings.

A: A lot of people do want that, but the people with power usually don't. The question is how to merge the traditional with the new.

C: In Hanoi, there's a lot of variety at the lower end. There are preservation ordinances; it's just not applied. There is no standardization.

Q: How successful has Vietnam been in creating an international image?

A: Most people think of Saigon as "leftover French with mopeds." It may not be true, but it's the image. It raises the question -- does it matter?

C: You can't talk about Vietnam without talking about politics. Politics come before images. Architecture is not the most important thing.

Real Time Rapporteurs

Karen Polenske

Well, Tunney stole my punch line, but that's OK. First of all, I want to say that I grew up on a farm so cities are strange and hard to be in for me, and mega-cities are more difficult. I've been in China, but mostly in rural areas. I admire Kevin Lynch. It's very important for us to figure out what and for whom are these skyscrapers being built and how will they be used for the social, economic, and cultural life of the city. That's what is important. I was a bit frustrated because the presentation didn't talk about what went on in them. We also need to think about the city, the region, and the politics. In addition, I notice that you can't open windows in these buildings -- if we're concerned with conserving nonrenewable resources, the lack of attention to the windows is counterproductive. The other thing is the role of information technology with the city and its buildings. How do you form communities in them? Do you want to? As an economist, I'd love to see work on how the form of these buildings affect the economy of the city. How does the economic nature of the city change with these high-rises?

Tunney Lee

I want to thank Larry for such an interesting set of images which I think are a tip of the iceberg. We are witnessing in Asia one of the great social transformations in world history. And I want to add that these cities and countries are very different. They range on one end from Japanese cities and Hong Kong which are capitalist, to Singapore which is another kind of hybrid, to Malaysia and Indonesia which are undergoing political transformation under authoritarian leaderships -- they all have very different political histories. We can't divorce architecture from politics. HK, Tokyo, and Singapore are very different from Kuala Lumpur. There is a difference if a building is a monument to a dictator or natural part of the city. You don't create an image and then invite investment; what you do is to create the environment for investment which then creates the image.

I'm troubled by the discussion of who wants what and what's the image. I don't know how to answer it. From Hong Kong's point of view, they are already in the next stage. They have already achieved a hyper density culture.

The office building is the least interesting architectural problem -- it's the core, office footprint, and open space. The real work is in the smaller buildings.

We have to distinguish between westernism and modernism. When we say culture and tradition, we have to know what we're talking about. We have to be very careful and more subtle. What's Chinese? What is American? American is what Americans do. It's the same for Chinese. It's more interesting to look at complexity. It was an interesting talk and an interesting topic, but I think we should use it to further think about the topic and not to use it in a superficial way.