

PUBLIC LIVES

January 16, 2011

Randy David

Modern but out of place

Singapore. I am in this finely-manicured garden city to participate in a conference that aims to figure out what modernity has meant for people living outside the Western world. The West has always been the referent for the Modern, because it is where it all began. But Singapore is the perfect venue for something like this because while its modernity is beyond dispute, this is a country that is self-consciously asserting both a global and an Asian identity.

The meeting's convenor is Singapore's foremost public intellectual, architect and urban strategist William Lim. Lim's own life-long advocacy has been to prod governments to create cities that have a face and a heart, that will mirror the unique character conferred by their own people's way of life and history. He wants cities to be more inclusive, to be more open to the rights of people from all social classes to feel at home in them. His ideas are both populist and postmodern. He draws his arguments from radical political economy as well as from cutting edge postcolonial theory.

The conference he is organizing brings together professionals and scholars from all corners of the world and from various disciplines -- architects, planners, art historians, geographers, philosophers, and social theorists -- who share a passionate interest in, to borrow Lim's theatrical words, "re-scripting the modernist past." The Eurocentric accounts of that past, according to him, reserve no place for the rich creative modernist achievements from outside Europe and the United States. As a result of this, the hegemony of the Western modernist canon in the world's architectural schools remains unchallenged. Every non-Western architect who seeks recognition outside his country must be prepared to have his work measured by the Western yardstick. Often they are marginalized in

their own countries, reduced to being assistants to highly-paid Western consultants and design houses.

Lim asks, why should this be the case? The West has no monopoly of modernism. There is no rule that says that the European version of the modern -- the simple minimalist lines, the machine aesthetic, the technological industrialism of steel and glass, the rejection of tradition, and the international outlook -- must serve as the standard for everyone. For these attributes sprang from a historical and psychosocial context that was to be found mainly in Europe between the two world wars. It made no sense elsewhere. Yet its most famous expression, the Bauhaus design, achieved such phenomenal acclaim worldwide that it became the emblem of modernism in practically all the arts.

Famous architects, or "starchitects", as they were sometimes derisively called, soon filled the world's skyline with their awesome spectacles of glass and steel skyscrapers. In the early years following WW2, modernist architects teamed up with nation-building rulers, many of them despots, to create structural symbols for their people's emancipation from colonialism and the start of their forward march to progress. But political muscle soon gave way to corporate and financial muscle. Banks and investment houses led the way in the creation of spectacular buildings whose singular goal was to project their global economic presence. These buildings became the norm for modern architecture.

Though these structures were profoundly alienating, people simply got used to them. Indeed they began to copy their form in a reverse appropriation -- often using the modern basically as an ornamentation. Still, this penchant for copying has left its mark on the way we build homes in the city, creating dysfunctions that alter the way we live. The conventional 2-floor apartment house borrowed from the US is a good example, my brother Nestor, an architect, points out. The staircase leading from the dining room and sala on the first floor to the bedrooms upstairs is so wrongly conceived that it acts like a chimney, sucking up all the smoke and smells from all the frying and grilling in the Pinoy kitchen below. It is

not a problem in the West where food tends to be blander and homes are usually equipped with range hoods and chimneys. Our modern ventilation systems appear to have learned nothing from the efficient management of the breeze that the "bahay kubo" exemplifies. Modern homes also tend to be so dark even during the day that lights are switched on the whole day, as if these homes were made for wintry Europe and not for the tropics.

For a while, the trend was mediterranean." We see this today in almost every community that has a large population of overseas Filipino workers. I remember noticing the early prototypes of these homes in the late '70s while visiting Tripoli in Libya. Mediterranean style here does not mean the exquisite lines of homes dotting the French Riviera or the coast of Izmir. It means rather the modern eclectic houses that Filipino contract workers built in Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East. When they had earned their own money, the carpenters came home and built their own houses using the designs they had internalized in the course of their Middle Eastern sojourn. These are the houses we see in nearly every OFW-sending barrio today. They stand apart from the local landscape on which they are built, as if in rejection of the past that nourished their inhabitants. They are "modern" but out of place.

public.lives@gmail.com