

## THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF SPACE

Soo Chan (Chan Soo Khian) is one of a growing number of young architects who are making a substantial contribution to the built environment of the burgeoning cities of South-East Asia.

It is more than a decade since he relocated to Singapore after completing his studies and architectural internship in the USA. He set up a design studio in the South-East Asian city-state in 1995 and two years later established SCDA Architects. From the Singapore base, the practice is now building in India, China, Malaysia, France and the USA.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he is concerned with refining a modern tropical architectural language. In the process of 'confronting' his own roots in South-East Asia, he has developed new solutions that mediate the universal with the locally specific.

Born (1962) and raised in Penang, an island off the west coast of Malaysia, Chan left home as a teenager to undertake his architectural education at Washington University and Yale University. The whole of the 1980s were spent in the USA.

After finishing his Bachelor of Arts at Washington University, where he was introduced to the inter-disciplinary methodology of the Bauhaus and the Dutch De Stijl, particularly the works of Theo van Doesburg (1883 – 1931), the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, and Kasimir Malevich (1878 – 1935), Chan went on to study architecture at Yale University, School of Art and Architecture. The advanced architecture studios had a roster of rotating chaired professorships held by distinguished practitioners. In addition to the usual elective in art history, Chan pursued classes in School of Fine Arts in sculpture, painting and photography.

Discussions at the school of architecture in the 1980s centered on issues of urbanism, representation and meaning against the framework of ongoing post-structuralist discourse. Against a backdrop of diverse design philosophies, Chan took a conservative route and attempted to ground himself in classicism. This inevitably influenced his choice of studios by Rob Krier, Thomas Gordon Smith and Robert Venturi, and upon graduation his internship at the office of Allan Greenberg, a classicist architect. The notion of order, hierarchy, proportion, scale and composition was ingrained in him.

In retrospect, he believes that the early grounding that he received in the classical language of architecture significantly influenced his development as an architect. It was a point of reference from which he went on to appreciate the works of the Modern masters: Louis Kahn, Mies Van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. The two Kahn art galleries at Yale were a point of reference for him to develop a structural and spatial vocabulary – a language of volumes and planes enhanced by light and structural order. The notion of 'implied centres' was firmly established as a loci for orientation. The humanist tradition of classical architecture and the formal and spatial plasticity of the Dutch De Stijl were notable influences in his later works.

In 1991, his internship with Kohn Pedersen Fox in the USA completed, he decided to relocate to Singapore. In part, this was motivated by a desire to reconnect with his Asian roots after spending almost a decade in the USA. In the tropics the ambiguous boundary between interior and exterior spaces and the spatial engagement with landscape, became an important agenda in his work. He established a network of contacts and, in 1995 set up Chan Design Associates (SCDA), initially as an interior design studio. Two years later, after obtaining his license to practice in Singapore, he extended operations into architecture where he subsequently made a substantial impact in a succession of consistently well-designed conservation projects, private houses, and commercial interiors.

## Space, Light and Structural Order

'The design process starts with the careful consideration of programme and site as part of the overall matrix for generation of ideas. The works are informed by the cultural and climatic nuances of the context and seek to capture the essence of 'place. The designs strive for tranquility and calmness enhanced by space, light and structural order. The free plans in the designs are grounded in classical ideals of scale and proportion. The spaces within the 'free plans' overlap and are further defined through the careful placement and clear expression of walls and ceiling planes that intersect with or 'slide by' each other. Compositionally these walls propagate from multiple 'centres' within the flowing spaces. These 'centres' implied within the open concept planning are reinforced when the spaces are experienced sequentially and hierarchically through choreographed processions that recentre and realign the perceptual 'axis' that terminates in objects, landscaped vistas or open spaces. These spaces are designed to heighten the experience of sound, touch, smell and sight, unfolding sequentially as one move through the spaces. Mechanical and electrical services are often grouped as service 'walls' and 'cores' in deference to the served spaces. Order is emphasized through a clear expression of structure.' Soo Chan (2001)

Chan does not consciously attempt to design with an Asian identity. Several projects reference the traditional vernacular of the tropics, but he is committed to refining a modern architectural language and simultaneously rethinking typologies. His latest work endorses my view that he is moving towards a clear, critical position that captures the spirit of a specific place by simultaneously considering closely the culture and the climate.

Chan is involved in a continuous exploration of the 'Choreography of Space' and in speaking of his work he refers to five attributes – namely Light, Space, Structure, Transparency and Texture. These Properties are uncannily close to the guiding principles of Louis Kahn (1902-1974) whose work was also rooted in classical grammar, with devices of axial organization and composition. Not surprisingly Kahn's design for The Yale Art Gallery (1951-53) is one of Chan's favourite buildings. Kahn believed the very basis of architecture to be the 'making' of space. He wrote: 'If I were to define architecture in a word, I would say that architecture is a thoughtful making of space. It is not filling prescriptions as clients want the filled. It is not fitting uses into dimensioned areas. It is creating of spaces that evoke a feeling of use. Spaces which form themselves into a harmony good for the use to which the building is to be put. I believe that the architect's first act is to take the program that comes to him and change it. Not to satisfy it but to put it into the realm of architecture, which is to put it into the realm of spaces.

In Chan's architecture space acquires specific attributes. At the heart of the Cairnhill Gallery, for example, a soaring, light-filled, two-storey-high volume is the culmination of a carefully structured sequence of movement. In the East Coast House multiple spatial experiences are crafted within a finite volume. A feeling of overwhelming calmness is experienced in this internalized world. And in a boutique for Song and Kelly the Spartan interior space has, paradoxically, an exquisite almost erotic quality.

If the choreography of space is the basis of Chan's architecture it is the introduction of light that creates a feeling of exhilaration. The light that floods into the interior of the apartments in the Ladyhill Condominium through internal courts, or the filtered sunlight that casts delicate shadows on the walls of the central courtyard in the Emerald Hill House, all illustrate the use of light. Light is focused, filtered and reflected in innumerable combinations to define and enhance spatial experiences.

Structure also plays a significant role in defining space, often in the form of an asymmetrical composition of planes and slender columns. Each space has an implied centre and spaces are often experienced as a sequence of inter-related volumes.

There are varying degrees of transparency with the use of a diverse range of timber and metal louvred screens and opaque surfaces, so that a space is private and enclosed or alternatively extends openly to embrace the landscape. Texture also contributes immeasurably in defining space. The surface texture of polished marble, off-form concrete, glass, mirrors, timber and water animate spaces, reflecting or absorbing light, and furthermore providing tactile pleasure.

The five attributes to which Chan makes reference are synonymous with the attributes of 'dwelling' articulated by the architectural critic Peter Davey: 'It seems unlikely that virtual reality will offer us a sense of particularity and place in the foreseeable future, if ever. We are thrown back on the traditional resources architecture has to offer: light, space, texture, materiality, aroma, enclosure and articulated expression of our relationship to awesome and implacable nature.'

### **Globalization of Practice**

At the outset of this essay I noted that Chan's decision to relocate from the USA to Singapore in 1991 was in part motivated by a desire to reconnect with his Asian roots. Now, more than a decade later, he has made a tentative move 'Out of Asia' and onto a world stage with projects in India, Malaysia, Thailand, China, France, Hong Kong, and the USA. It reminds me of a paragraph in the book *Pacific Edge*, in which the author Peter Zellner notes, in referring to the work of a number of architects working around the Asia-Pacific Rim: 'What these architect's work collectively suggest is that International Modernism, once reviled for its universalizing and, perhaps, culturally anaesthetizing tendencies, is now wholly integrated into various local societies and in due course has returned to the global scene in new and unexpected forms. If their architectural ideas come largely from the Modernist catalogue, their efforts are always directed towards merging that universal idiom with local, custom or technique.'

Zellner's comments were not directly referring to the work of SCDA but they are fitting, for the notion of globalization has a significant effect on SCDA's architecture. In the contemporary world system, architecture is a commodity that flows across national boundaries. The 'New Asian' client is increasingly well-travelled, and via the Internet 'wired' to current fashion, so that architecture in South-East Asia is increasingly influenced by a wider discourse.

The work of SCDA Architects has been published on *Architecture Review* (UK), *Architectural Record* (USA), *Monument* (Australia), *World Architecture* (UK), *Indian Architect and Builder* (India), *Majallah Akitek* (Malaysia) and in *Tepe Mimarlik Kulturu Dergisi* (Turkey). This international exposure is recognition of the enduring quality of the firm's work.

Recognition of SCDA's work has also come from the academic community and in 2000 Chan received an invitation to teach as Visiting Professor at Syracuse University. Chan taught at the National University of Singapore from 1996 to 2001 and is currently a part-time teacher in the Department of Architecture. Chan regards this contact with academia as mutually beneficial. In September 2001 Chan was invited to exhibit his work in New Haven (USA). The exhibition entitled 'New Blue' was curated by Aaron Betsky and showcased the work of 20 years of Yale Graduates in the context of contemporary critical discourse in architecture.

The initial opportunity to extend the work of SCDA outside Singapore came with the commissioning in 1998 of the Rashid Mir House in New Delhi, India. Other projects came into the office: a penthouse in St Kilda, Australia (1999), a house in Genting Highlands, Malaysia

(2001), a house in Provence, France (2001), and office interior in Hong Kong (2001), a Master Plan and housing development in Qing Pu, an area of Shanghai (2001), and a mixed-use development with a 60-storey tower in Puxi within the North Bund area.

But while these commissions built upon SCDA's knowledge and experience of housing typologies an exciting new development was that several projects came into the office which enabled Chan to explore new directions. These included a commission to design a Columbarium in Guangzhou in the People's Republic of China (2002), a brief for a Toy Museum in Singapore (2003) and an invitation to design the new Singapore High Commission in New Delhi, India (2003).

In 2002 the Architectural Review (UK) Merit Award for Emerging Architecture confirmed the growing international reputation of Chan, a judgment endorsed by the selection of SCDA by Architectural Record (USA) as one of their Year 2003 Design Vanguard firms.

[Robert Powell]