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Asian Independence

Notes on Modernism and Creativity in the Built Environment

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Asian Independence: Notes on Modernism and Creativity in the Built Environment

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Jiat-Hwee Chang and Imran bin Tajudeen, eds. (2019). *Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture: Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power*. Singapore: NUS Press, 321 pp., notes, index, \$25.06 (paperback).

Lawrence Chua (2021). *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 274 pp., notes, bibliography, index, \$75 (hardback).

Matjaz Ursic and Heidi Imai (2020). *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a Mature City*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 248 pp., notes, bibliographies, index, \$124.90 (hardback).

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This article discusses three recently published books examining the cities of East Asia. The first, *Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture: Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power* (2019), edited by Jiat-Hwee Chang and Imran bin Tajudeen,¹ “explores the histories of Southeast Asia’s architecture and built environment in the twentieth century” (p. 2) while actually questioning “the validity and utility of Southeast Asia as a geographic unit and taxonomic device for framing and understanding” it (p. 2). The second, Lawrence Chua’s *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973* (2021),² “outlines an alternative genealogy of both utopia and modernism in a part of the world that has often been overlooked by scholars of both” (p. 1), while *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a Mature City* (2020), edited by Matjaz Ursic and Heidi Imai,³ “is an attempt to initiate discussion on the partial or nonholistic use of creativity concepts for specific economic and political goals, as well as to show their possible short- and long-term effects” (p. ix).

In Southeast Asia, the histories of both architecture and the built environment were closely aligned with Modernism in the late colonial project and the independence that followed it. Most of the countries in the region were under colonial rule, namely, under British, French, Dutch, or American rule. The region itself (also a problematic concept, as we shall see) contains, however, one country that remained independent throughout: Thailand (or Siam, as it was formerly known). So, perhaps we can think of “independence” as not just a sloughing off of colonial rule, but actual independence, of thought and action.

Lawrence Chua’s book on Bangkok beautifully illustrates how this independence was articulated in Thailand’s capital city, while the third book under discussion here deals with yet another independent Asian nation: Japan. Indeed, Japan was more than simply independent; it joined the Western powers as colonial/imperial aggressors after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) when it began assembling its own short-lived Asian empire. This was of course the same time that America was making its own imperial incursions into the region with the annexation of the

Philippines after the brief Spanish-American War in 1898. This seemed a logical step westward to the Americans, after they had claimed most of the North American continent. This brief sketching of the historical backdrop to these books will help position some of their ideas, but first, let us begin by taking a look at the articulation of Modernism in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture

This first book strategically deploys the concept of Southeast Asia as a region to “selectively foreground a number of pertinent historiographical questions through the themes of translation, epistemology and power” (p. 15). It challenges Eurocentric ideas about architecture and the urban environment, seeing them not as aesthetic artifacts but the locus of power relations. The editors question “the validity and utility of Southeast Asia as a geographic unit and taxonomic device for framing and understanding the built environment” (p. 2). However, they find it useful in “concurrently describing and revealing architectural commonalities otherwise invisible or occluded by the use of other frameworks” (p. 2). They even see the instability of the regional concept as potentially productive—conducive to an “archipelagic imagination” (Brian Bernards) that prioritizes “contact, exchange, heterogeneity, and creolization instead of [. . .] uniformity and singularity” (p. 3).

The editors identify three methodological challenges: translation, epistemology, and power. The first sees perspectives that “break away from simplistic narratives of transfer or transplantation from the West” (p. 8), a shift “from the assumption of Southeast Asia’s passive acceptance of external influences” (p. 9). Epistemology shows how a new understanding of colonial dominance is being attributed “as much to European cultural hegemony as to its military might and industrial strength” (p. 11). They also highlight how the “foundational knowledge in many disciplines [. . .] were produced during the colonial era as handmaidens of the colonial project” (p. 11). This lingering legacy of a “Eurocentric epistemic structure—in terms of architectural historiography and nomenclature—that was laid down by the colonial scholars [has] continued to undergird the ways architectural history in and of Southeast Asia is written” (p. 11). Finally, power, which moves “away from Foucauldian power-knowledge” (p. 13) tries to address “the analytics of power in the built environment” (p. 13). Architectural history “has emerged as a key analytical theme in the discussion of architecture’s entanglements with society, culture, politics and economy” (p. 13) but it sometimes falls short by seeing “the effect of power [that] is at times too easily correlated with formal qualities” (p. 13). The editors warn that focusing on buildings as “visible politics” could reduce our ability to understand the “nuances of space and power-relations” (p. 13).

They conclude their introduction by reminding us of how important it is to understand *how* ideas get translated when circulated (p. 15; something examined by Lawrence Chua in the next section). They also stress that architectural nomenclature (and its underlying epistemic constructions) need to be critically examined (p. 15), and that architectural production is “inextricably linked to the contexts and conditions of its production” (p. 15). Yet they also note that design has “the agency to reshape or transform its very contexts and conditions of production” (pp. 15-16). Mark Crinson adds an insightful epilogue that traces the etymology of the term “region,” highlighting its continuing relevance for research in an era when “globalisation and its neoliberal global bodies [have] take[n] over [the] normalising role of empire or nation state” (p. 299).

Chap. 5 (in the Epistemology section) is by Anoma Pieris and points to neoliberal economic policies that allowed the rise of the East Asian tiger economies in the 1990s: “an affluent group of nations dominated by East Asian values [that] have maintained cultural autonomy from the West” (p. 146). However, apart from highlighting this economic well-being, the chapter is pessimistic because improvements are “not necessarily wedded to democratic change” (p. 139).

Pieris points to a deep contradiction in “ideals of enlightenment and democracy [being] conveyed to colonised subjects via an economically exploitative, racist culture supported by superior military power” (p. 141) and points to how architecture “as an agent of power and capital [is] complicit in inequitable neocolonial social relations” (p. 139)

Tim Winter’s chap. 4 (the only other chapter in *Epistemology*) examines heritage diplomacy in Bagan, Myanmar. Currently under consideration for World Heritage status, significant reconstruction has taken place here since the 1990s and has been criticized for leading to “a loss of authenticity” (p. 116). This is further complicated by the funding for this reconstruction, which has come from within Asia. Bagan “speaks to wider debates within Asia’s heritage profession concerning the validity of different approaches” (p. 116) where “there has been a sustained and growing unease about philosophies and practices of cultural conservation imported from the West” (p. 116). Ruins in the West are subject to a reading “characterised by the values of objectivity, rationality and scientific rigour” (p. 120), whereas Bagan’s stupas’ ruinous state speak “of abandonment and the loss of sacred power” (pp. 128-129). The “re-establishment of a temple site involves its reactivation, rather than the reconstruction of the physical fabric to a previous form” (p. 129). This is hard for Westerners to understand, but if we foreground “culture as practice, rather than immutable beauty, the religious comes into view” (p. 130) and we can see that these are not mere artifacts; they are places of worship.

Moving from Bagan to Angkor, H. Hazel Hahn’s chapter (in the Translation section) combines tourism with urban planning to explore divisions in French colonial Indochina, which Rabindranath Tagore briefly visited in 1929. Angkor was one of the places he wanted to visit, but he was unable to. Perhaps just as well, given the hosts’ and guest’s very different conceptions of the site. Tagore saw Angkor “as tangible evidence of the influence of ancient India” (p. 49) whereas the French were busy promoting their “restoration” into a tourism showcase (a mutual mistranslation). Neither was Tagore taken to any grand hotels as “they were not widely viewed as sites showcasing the benefits of colonisation” (p. 41), and he only saw local temples on his last day because as “sites of indigenous and local spirituality, religions and customs, [they were] thus seen as furthest removed from French civilisational influence” (p. 31).

One other chapter in this section that deals with tourism is chap. 3 by Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava. It is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book with its prescient analysis of Bali Style, described as “a somewhat ad-hoc phenomenon [that] emerged not so much by design, but as an expression of a critical resistance or counterpoint to the universalising norms and forms of mass tourism” (p. 103). This style has “entered into critical academic discourse on the architecture of the region as well as a whole sub-industry of glossy publications targeted at both design professionals and amateurs” (p. 85). Not governed by any “strictly prescribed set of formalisms” (p. 103), it is now “an open-ended creative design ‘method’ for producing exquisite and distinctive experiences” (p. 103); “a method of place-making rather than just a particular look” (p. 104). It spread throughout Asia and was particularly popular for luxury hotels, where Modernist slabs could have sensitively designed interiors that were to be “the international traveler’s initial primer in cultural tourism” (p. 100). Such interiors were “a way to bring the colour, textures and tectonic riches of local and regional building culture safely inside the fortress-like shell of the hotel” (p. 101; something we also see mentioned by Lawrence Chua in the next section). Often regarded as “a particularist variation or a regional hybrid in the global expansion of an essentially Western conception of the Modern” (p. 86), and criticized as being “a variant of a consciously contrived regionalism” (p. 85), this chapter points to the style’s importance in actually allowing “certain agents to assume control of the debate and reposition themselves not only locally but on a transnational and increasingly global stage” (p. 85). They also show how it all began in Bali in the 1960s. Inspired by local vernacular, it was a “gentle insurgency against [. . .] high-rise construction” (p. 89) before eventually allowing Asian entrepreneurs exercise “direct agency in the global flows of capital

and architectural services” (p. 86). It also strongly influenced Geoffrey Bawa, who came to Bali in 1972 on a project.

The section on Power begins with Gerard Lico’s examination of America’s overhaul of Manila’s urban environment in the interests of its colonial administration and sanitary modernity. This was intended to signal “the power and prestige of the new colonial order” (p. 169). This article makes no mention, however, of the 333 years of Spanish rule that resulted in this particular urban environment, which “[t]hrough the lens of the American sanitary gaze” (p. 170) was viewed as “filthy to the extreme” (p. 170). In an eerie echoing of conditions currently experienced by this author at time of writing (under COVID lockdown in the Netherlands), epidemics were seen as justifying “the medicalisation of space, both public and private, and biopolitical reinvention of native spatial behaviours through the alliance of tropical medicine, sanitary science and urban design” (p. 171). Urban planning “became the mechanism by which colonial adjudications of cleanliness, civility and modernity were realised from the ground up” (p. 169). Native bodies became biopolitical objects “under constant surveillance, submitting themselves to the supervisory actions of the colonial state” (p. 171), and American colonial/hygienic surveillance was implemented with a Foucauldian logic both “meticulous and militaristic” (p. 172). Just like today, sanitary controls “affected traditional practices such as visits to the sick, attendance at funerals, burial practices, and indigenous curative and therapeutic regimen” (p. 172), depriving the indigenous community of valuable tools “to ease social tensions in times of traumatic illness, death and mourning” (pp. 172-173). Lico points to how “urbanism and architecture replaced physical force and coercive strategies with rituals of civility and governmentality to solicit native obedience to the colonial state” (p. 187). As Foucault himself says,⁴ “Stones make people docile and knowable” (1995, p. 172).

Chap. 8, by Eunice Seng, looks at the People’s Park Complex, Singapore, the first urban renewal project built by private developers in the 1960s. It was part of “a self-conscious recentring of the city’s identity” (p. 243) and was “the biggest and tallest shopping-cum-residential complex ever to be built in Singapore and the first of its kind to be built in Southeast Asia” (p. 247). This “instant city” established shopping as “a national activity and the atrium as a public space of the city” (p. 251).

Tutin Aryanti, in chap. 9, offers a feminist critique of Islamic architecture by examining two women’s mosques, one in Kauman Village and the other a sultan’s palace harem. Studies of mosques tend to emphasize aesthetics and style and ignore the users, or assume them to be homogeneous. This chapter highlights how “women and their prayer spaces are marginalised in mosque architectural history” (p. 275) because of “the insistence on form as the primary object of investigation [that] leaves an important area of meaning unexamined: the interaction between the space and the user” (p. 274).

Bangkok is the only city to merit two chapters: chap. 7, by Koompong Noobanjong, looks at the “forgotten memorials” of the Constitutional Defense Monument (moved to make way for traffic) and the Democracy Temple (Wat Mahathat). Both monuments’ original symbolic signification have been “largely forgotten and ignored by the general public” (p. 194) and reveal the dilemma faced by Thai people in constructing national and cultural identity, which was “syncretic, inconsistent, ambiguous and even self-contradictory” (p. 217). These concepts are explored in detail in Lawrence Chua’s *Bangkok Utopia*, but his chapter in this book (in the Translation section) explores how modernism and fascism were translated into the Thai context. Chua reminds us that Thailand (called Siam until 1939) was never colonized, yet interestingly, “the Bangkok-based monarchy deployed colonial methods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to create a nation state” (p. 60). The 1932 coup, which ended absolute monarchy, saw a new form of government that saw fascism as “a panacea for the evils of both colonialism and communism that threatened their sovereignty” (p. 58). Chua brilliantly shows how what “appears to be a misunderstanding of forms and ideas is actually an important step in the universalisation of

these ideas” (p. 59), where “[s]uch concepts became universal not because there was something inherently universal about ‘modernity’ and its architectural forms but because they were used, and misused, in diverse situations” (p. 59). He explores “such distortions in the translation of concepts and forms as they travelled along routes more complex than the binaries of ‘West’ and ‘Non-West’ might suggest” (p. 61).

Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973

This book is a chronological tour of Thai history using architecture to illustrate the nation’s modernization. Lawrence Chua begins it by admitting that the word “utopia” is not often associated with Bangkok (p. 1)—a traffic-congested sprawling behemoth of a city. “Utopia” is a fraught term because it is “often implicated in the failure of modernist architects to provide appropriate settings for civic and private life” (p. 1), while “Modernism” is associated with “disenchantment, scientific reason, the rise of an autonomous bourgeoisie, liberal democracy, industrialization” (p. 3). The concept of utopia entered the Thai language where it encountered “the felicitous city of *nibbana* [nirvana]” (p. 5) which meant that Modernism “did not occasion a full-scale rejection of Buddhist felicities, older cosmological understandings of space, sociopolitical arrangements, and material approaches to the built environment” (p. 3). Thai architecture accommodated these felicities while modernizing on its own terms (p. 3) because (as Chua says, quoting Tamara Loos) in Thailand “modernity was never secular but always Buddhist” (p. 7).

Chua thinks Bangkok is an excellent “case study for scholars who seek an understanding of how local forms of knowledge and truth claims transformed the new forms, technologies, and expertise of modern architecture” (p. 3), particularly because

Thailand did not experience direct colonization by a European power but performed a kind of autocolonization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [where] older, cosmologically based ideologies of political legitimation entered into a complex relationship with nationalism as the Siamese monarchy sought to assert their identity as both divine and modern rulers. (p. 5)

As “Siam” became “Thailand,” the nation reached into an imagined past while projecting into a modern future. Utopian nationalism allowed “the old regime to revive itself, albeit in an adjusted form” (p. 5). As Chua says in his epilogue, Bangkok’s modernity

was not merely imitative of the experience of urbanization, industrialization, and secularization in Europe and the United States. It was the heterogeneous product of an encounter between labor, materials, technologies, and, most important, ideas that circulated across diverse trade, migration, and intellectual network. (pp. 194-195)

Furthermore, “[t]his encounter not only challenged and transformed older, Buddhist understandings of space and time but transformed modernism itself” (p. 195).

The book’s most interesting contribution to these discussions is its offering of “an alternative genealogy of both utopia and modernism in a part of the world that has often been overlooked by scholars of both” (p. 1). This is particularly important because “the ideological framework of neoliberal capitalism denies that any alternatives are possible, let alone viable” (p. 11).

In chap. 2, Chua gives some historical background to the founding of Bangkok in 1782 and the establishment of the new dynasty of the *chakravartin* (righteous or Universal Monarch—a Theravadin Buddhist concept). Here, royal authority lay in duties, forged in the relationship with the Buddhist clergy (p. 22). This is a subtle refinement of the *devaraja* (God-King) concept popular under Mahayana Buddhism, and the shift in emphasis, from rights to duties, meant that

political power was “no longer displayed exclusively through monuments like the city pillar” (p. 24) but “through infrastructural interventions and public spaces” (p. 24).

Thailand (as Siam) was never colonized. It was, however, reduced significantly in size, losing Laos and Cambodia to the French, the Shan states to British Burma (now Myanmar), and four southern states to British Malaya. Learning from their colonial neighbors, the monarchy deployed its own colonial methods to consolidate their nation. We see these outlined in chap. 3, the first of three chapters in the Tools section, where “utopian nationalism” uses the “language of architecture [as] a way of transmitting ideas about communal belonging” (p. 51). This, along with literature, diagrams, technical drawings, and models, allowed “people to think of themselves and their relationships to others in new ways, united in the goal of creating a utopia in the city” (p. 51). This was particularly important in enabling the state naturalize large numbers of Chinese immigrants. Chua quotes early twentieth-century Thai architect Ithitthespan as saying that while “the city was built by human labor, the city also shaped human behavior. Orderly and beautiful cities, created by knowledgeable architects, produced well-behaved citizens who worked, played, and lived together in convenience, joy, and safety” (p. 48), foreshadowing Foucault’s docile-making stones by half a century.

Chap. 4 discusses the Dusit Thani miniature city built by King Vajiravudh in 1918, which became the center of “a queer aesthetic regime that linked the king’s prolific endeavors in architecture, literature, theater, fashion, and visual art with the training of a modern ruling class” (p. 53). The king considered the model the basis on which “a new generation of leaders, drawn from the ranks of the newly emergent urban classes in Bangkok, could be trained” (p. 54). It was important for training this class not only in “the machinations of running a modern city but also the proper taste, dress, and behavior of its citizens” (p. 55). Rumors of homosexuality aside, excluding women from the court reduced the influence of older aristocratic families and allowed new men (commoners, and often handsome) to rise (pp. 60-61). This model was dismantled after the king died (p. 75). He was cremated in 1925 on Sanem Luang, the great green space adjacent to the old royal palace, and chap. 5 examines the politics of representation of his funeral pyre, as well as that of another pyre, from 1934, which was for soldiers killed in civil unrest the previous year. This unprecedented step of honoring commoners similar to kings demonstrated that ordinary citizens could also be glorified (p. 99) and showed how “the lines between state and Crown were redrawn” (p. 94).

Part Two, Materials, contains two chapters. Chap. 6 analyses the architecture of the Sala Chaloe Krung cinema that “integrated infrastructural symbolic approaches and brought together modern technologies like air-conditioning and materials like steel-reinforced concrete to produce a new kind of public space in which the experience of citizenship was manipulated through architectural design” (p. 105). This transformed Bangkok’s cinemas from “louche arenas of class conflict and unregulated play into utopian movie palaces that regulated the perceptual experience of the theater and produced a new sense of spatial order” (p. 106). This is the sort of “civilizing process that sought to change the experience of the city through a modern hygienic regime” (p. 108)—something resonating with Lico’s discussion of Manila. Part of this civilizing mission was the expectation that people stand for the national anthem (something they still did when I lived in Bangkok in the 1990s), but this was actually a new custom “borrowed from the British” (p. 112)—evidence, presumably, of colonial lessons learned.

The next chapter, Concretopia, examines the use of this material, which had been a nationalist endeavor since Siam Cement Company was established by the king in 1913. This was stimulated not only by the material’s association with modernity but also because the control of timber logging was by foreign companies (p. 129). After the 1932 coup, concrete really came into its own, widely used for government buildings and monuments, but it required new design language to articulate Thai motifs. The architectural vocabulary that resulted also signaled the importance of commoners in new political life (while creating a troubling affinity between utopianism and militarism (p. 131),

something we saw in Chua's chapter in the previous section (and this troubling militarism has never really gone away). Concrete became a metaphor for "the resilience of the masses in making sacrifices for the nation-state" (p. 131) and the new monuments used abstract symbols, such as the bayonet, or the enshrined constitution, replacing the body of the king as the focus of veneration (p. 148; something also highlighted by Noobanjong in the preceding section).

Chap. 8 is the only chapter in the Systems section and contrasts the twentieth-century focus on creating a "civilized" and "modern" nation with the "Cold War emphasis on 'development' [that] decoupled state priorities from the concepts of democracy and social equality that had been associated with modernism" (p. 190). Here we see what lurks in the shadows cast by developmental modernism. Chua points to two "floating worlds": migrant labor and tourists. The state changed from aiming for a modernist social equality to a policy where housing the floating population was no longer a priority, preferring to develop infrastructure of "roads and hotels that could move these populations into and out of the city cheaply and efficiently" (p. 166). Thai architects also turned away from designing public monuments, schools, and so on, to produce the hotels, banks, and office buildings that were the hallmarks of the "developed" city (p. 166; with many hotels showcasing the new Bali style). This new commercial bent to architecture showed the emergence of a powerful new business community, and left architects free to pursue "an agenda that was seemingly free of political responsibility and pragmatically respond to the demands of corporate clients" (p. 167). Bangkok's new commercial buildings "towered over a shadow city of slums, brothels, and 'love motels'" (p. 168), with a new road system replacing the water-based transport (which only led to traffic congestion and flooding). As Chua says, "[t]his dual image of the city, as both floating paradise and floating brothel, positioned Bangkok as part of a universal cultural and economic system and yet lagging behind it" (p. 168).

Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a Mature City

The third book brings us to Tokyo, capital of another uncolonized Asian nation and a world city, a mature city, and a creative city. This book highlights ways in which creativity is currently under attack in Tokyo from the top-down impositions of neoliberal globalization. Its real contribution, however, is to the creativity debate itself, thanks to a nuanced understanding of the urban environment as its nurturer.

Matjaz Ursic and Heidi Imai show us in detail how this nurturing works by using specific examples (all well researched and helpfully illustrated with photographs, diagrams, and maps—as are all three books). The Tokyo book intends "to initiate discussion on the partial or nonholistic use of creativity concepts for specific economic and political goals, as well as to show their possible short- and long-term effects" (p. ix). Ursic and Imai see creativity as linked to Victor Turner's concept of "liminality," places in "a temporary state of ambiguity, transition, or disorientation" (p. vii) where people "enter into dialogue with their environment" (p. vii). In seeking to "reframe and expand the existing evaluation criteria of adequate urban creativity" (p. ix), they show the importance of enhancing "social creativity factors that are less present or recognizable within the current creativity discourse of Tokyo" (p. ix). "This involves a reevaluation of what urban policies and important socioeconomic actors view as the 'correct way' to implement creative revitalization actions in sensitive city locations" (p. ix). In describing and analyzing "creativity as a process within an urban environment" (p. 6), they focus on creative individuals but "not on the output, or the creative product, but rather on the process that either ignites or obstructs urban creativity" (p. 6).

Both authors have been researching their subject for years but neither is native to Tokyo (or Japan). While quick to point out that some of their perspectives may "be seen as westernized, privileged, or hegemonic" (p. 1), they point out that all are based on research, analysis, and argumentation from empirical fieldwork (p. 1). They even suggest that their *gaijin* (foreign)

backgrounds might help in presenting “multiple perspectives that shift or decentralize the customary views on urban creativity in Tokyo” (p. 1).

Often seen as “precise, formalized, and institutionalized systems of space management” (p. 2), “the actual implementation of urban policies reflects broader, more complex processes, which [. . .] include other soft, or social and cultural, factors that are inevitably present in space” (p. 2). The importance of these “soft factors” in developing creative services and industries becomes apparent when urban policies are reduced to economic or physical elements (e.g., finance or infrastructure). This book pays particular attention to social and community aspects, which the authors see as representing “the core soft, socioenvironmental factors that constitute Tokyo’s creativity” (p. 4) and which are “a blind spot in current urban regeneration policies” (p. 4).

They begin by analyzing these soft factors from the view of small, local creative actors, some of whom “do not fall within the standard definition of the creative class” (p. 4). They then focus on actors employed in creative small- and medium-sized enterprises (p. 5) with the aim of identifying “the creative environmental characteristics that are highly regarded by these actors” (p. 5). This book’s focus is more on what these people *do* rather than make (p. 5). The authors’ insights about (1) “the inseparability of the creative and ordinary life spheres” (p. 5), where creative activities are found across all working sectors, not just in creative industries, and (2) that people “go through various stages of creativity and can be creatively active at very different stages in their career or life” (p. 6), are particularly valuable.

To show how social environment and creativity are connected, the authors use the concept of the “creative ecosystem” (p. 8), “places where specialized ways of exchanging, interacting, and communicating between people and their economic, social, and cultural capital occur” (p. 8). Traditional definitions of this ecosystem (Florida, Gates, et al.) tend to focus on the interplay between human capital, creative places, and creative industries (p. 8), Ursic and Imai insert a “fourth dimension”: “a local milieu or context encompassing people and their relation to the sociocultural system and environment, or local community” (p. 8).

Their primary focus is on seeing a creative ecosystem from a bottom-up, local (community) perspective, while also including the top-down perspective to “dissect creative industries through the creative occupations of small creative actors who influence local communities in Tokyo” (p. 10). They believe that the “micro and macro aspects of creativity are inseparable and cannot be taken as specific, isolated parts that can undergo transformations without collateral damage for the whole creative ecosystem” (p. 12). This holistic approach sees informal (i.e., unrecognized) and formal (recognized) dimensions of creativity as inseparable and “connected to the so-called creative capacity of the city” (p. 12).

Tokyo offers great potential for creativity; it “has unique local, microenvironmental elements that cannot be found in other global cities” (p. 12), but the city’s unique spatial features are “not yet optimized; in some cases they are neglected or even being gradually transformed, diminished, and destroyed” (p. 12), so this book acts as a timely warning before irreparable damage is done to Tokyo’s capacity for creativity.

Chaps. 3 and 4 lay the groundwork for the empirical analysis contained in the subsequent chapters. They begin by conceptualizing urban creativity in Tokyo, showing how important small creative actors are to the city’s creative ecosystem. Authorities usually acknowledge “the importance and potential of tangible cultural capital” (p. 60) but often neglect “the role of equally important intangible cultural capital” (p. 60). By focusing on the former, which is easier to manage, they “diminish the complexity of the urban development process through the momentary elimination of a number of hidden social and cultural aspects in space” (pp. 60-61). By taking the easiest way of capitalizing on cultural resources they may result in diminishing the city’s creative capacity (p. 61). In explaining this, the authors make effective use of Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “production of space,” to which they add “other collective experiences of space that over time produce a new space, which eludes the simple definitions of a physical commodity with an

aesthetic value” (p. 60). They also reference Sharon Zukin, noting that “cities are no longer seen as landscapes of production, but rather as landscapes of consumption” (p. 68), although this does rather ignore the fact that creative output is also produced.

Small creative actors are important to Tokyo’s creative ecosystem but remain relatively hidden (p. 85). Their unique position (between creativity, everyday life, and the larger economic system in which they are trying to prosper; p. 85) means that they possess “greater sensitivity to environmental impulses, which enables them to perceive, identify, and elaborate on upcoming trends, problems, and transformations of living and working environments before others do” (p. 85). Ursic and Imai see these actors “as mediators who represent a bridge between the two dimensions of Tokyo’s creative ecosystem, standing with one foot in creative economies as part of wider creative clusters and with the other in the sociocultural systems of local communities” (pp. 85-86). This they see as defining “the very nature of Tokyo’s top-down and bottom-up transfers in terms of the flow of ideas, people, and economic and cultural capital” (p. 86). Examining “specific elements that support or obstruct the development of small creative actors offers a glimpse into the state of a city’s long-term creative capacity” (p. 86). Finding ways “to establish spaces for the nondestructive coexistence of diverse interests, functions, and lifestyles is one of the most subtle challenges for any attempt at urban redevelopment that supports creativity” (p. 98).

The next three chapters contain two case studies each and feature excerpts from interviews highlighting different issues providing intimate snapshots of the interviewees’ daily lives, work, use of space, etc. The first two case studies, Hikifune and Kyojima, shown how “creative and artistic innovations are the result of collaborative work and discussion, and mutually overcoming obstacles” (pp. 134-135). This show that “creatives” do not work in isolation (as is often assumed) but that the “social dimension of creativity is important to consider as people take time to critically reflect, adjust, or even radically alter their creative contribution” (p. 135).

The two next cases, Bakurocho and Koenji, show how subcultures can have economic value, by attracting “attention from different forms of media that co-opt these subcultures and integrate them into the consumer culture” (p. 172). This leads to cultural appropriation that turns subcultural (and even countercultural) activities into mainstream trends (p. 172). The next chapter examines Ichigaya, an “historical area characterized by traditional forms of craft and high culture and a close-knit community that has succeeded in reviving the neighborhood from within, using different bottom-up initiatives” (p. 178). Even though it shows that “there are still differences in the reappropriation process [. . .] the creative capacity of an area also depends heavily on preexisting resources” (p. 177). This is contrasted with Kiyosumi Shirakawa, where the local government has introduced creative policies “to revive a neighborhood characterized by an aging and shrinking number of local residents” (p. 178). “Maintaining a well-balanced mix of people seems to be crucial, as an increasing number of people have recently moved away, passed away, or decided for other reasons to stop operating their local businesses” (p. 188).

The next chapter, chap. 8, uses a quantitative-qualitative approach to accumulate layers of data to facilitate the analysis of “how specific characteristics of place and environment influence the organization of creative work and the living conditions of creatives” (p. 204). Results show that interviewees’ perception of a specific space’s value “expands from mere physical infrastructure and geographic location to social aspects and multiple forms of cultural capital that accumulate in the area over longer periods of time” (p. 216).

Ursic and Imai make clear that Tokyo has to “improve its soft spatial factors to accommodate the economic heterogeneity represented by various types of big and small creative actors” (p. 219) and that the city “will have to provide spaces and places that are capable of more than simply preserving the existing uniqueness and diversity in the central wards” (p. 219). Tokyo has some “unique sociocultural qualities that distinguish it from other global cities” (p. 219), yet “[i]t is becoming increasingly necessary for an economically successful city to be able to

both preserve differential qualities and to absorb or integrate heterogeneities that come with the process of globalization and internationalization” (p. 219). The authors also note that “soft factors such as cultural diversity or internationalization may prove to be crucial if the city wants to further differentiate itself from other competitive cities in the region” (pp. 219-220).

They conclude their book by reminding us that “to understand how to make cities more sustainable, we have first to better understand the creativity of all users and how to support these processes to make good use of them” (p. 228). It is the nurturing of these processes (rather than their products) that constitutes the book’s most important message. The intent of “this book was to make more visible and understandable at least some of the overlooked aspects of creativity to expose their importance and role as interdependent variables in the creative ecosystem” (p. 232), and in this they have succeeded.

Conclusion

Modernism (and modernization) are the red thread connecting the first two of these books, whether as a response to colonial/postcolonial impositions in the nations of Southeast Asia, or, in parallel, in independent Siam/Thailand. “Modernity achieved” could be the theme of the third book. With Tokyo’s global city status seemingly assured, the achievement of global preeminence comes with a warning about what can happen to a city’s creativity when the top-down homogenizing influences of neoliberal globalization are given free reign. Cities need to be vigilant to the needs of their creative classes lest a blind adherence to the tenets of capitalism shunt them aside in the pursuit of short-term profit through the commodification of their artistic products, and with it their precious, fertile, fragile urban environment—the very thing that allows social and creative networks to flourish in the first place. The colonial era is long gone (as is the era of Modernism) but let us not now repeat their mistakes by allowing a neoliberal globalist agenda undermine Asian independence.

Notes

1. Jiat-Hwee Chang and Imran bin Tajudeen, eds., *Southeast Asia’s Modern Architecture: Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019).
2. Lawrence Chua, *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021).
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1975]).
4. Matjaz Ursic and Heidi Imai. *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a Mature City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

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