

Alternative Visions for a Modern Singapore



In the following article, **Dinesh Naidu, Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin** argue that there were multiple streams of architectural practice or theory in the history of Singapore's post-war architecture.

The discourse on Singapore's post-war architecture is dominated by the late E. J. Seow's 1973 doctoral thesis, *Architectural Development in Singapore*ⁱ. As the basis of local university courses on the subjectⁱⁱ and the semi-official history put forth by the Singapore Institute of Architectsⁱⁱⁱ, it presents an important starting point for the authors' study^{iv}.

In his thesis, Seow describes a large and varied body of post-war work. He argues that this was heavily influenced by foreign sources, the result being "a mixed bag of international styles from various movements, and tending to... eclecticism."^v Seow also calls architecture an 'individualistic art', arguing that, "although every architect derives inspiration from various sources the final output as expressed in design is the result of individual personality".^{vi} However, he does not consider if 'individual personality' contributed

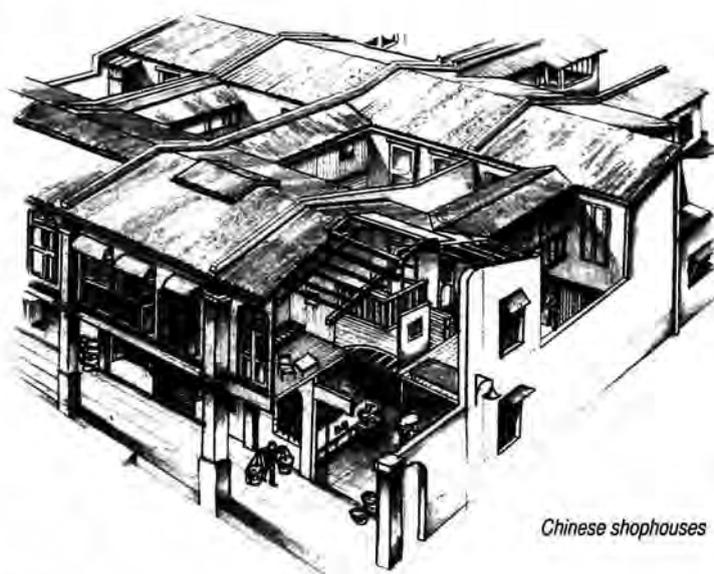
to the development of wider architectural approaches. Ultimately, all diversity is subsumed under the singular category of 'Modern architecture'.

Furthermore, the post-war architectural diversity in Singapore was expressive of a wider culture of pluralism. The post-war era up to the 1970s has been called Singapore's 'false spring' of political pluralism, a window between the waning of British colonial authority and the consolidation of hegemonic power by the People's Action Party (PAP). Only now is this period being re-visited by scholars, offering insights for this article.^{vii}

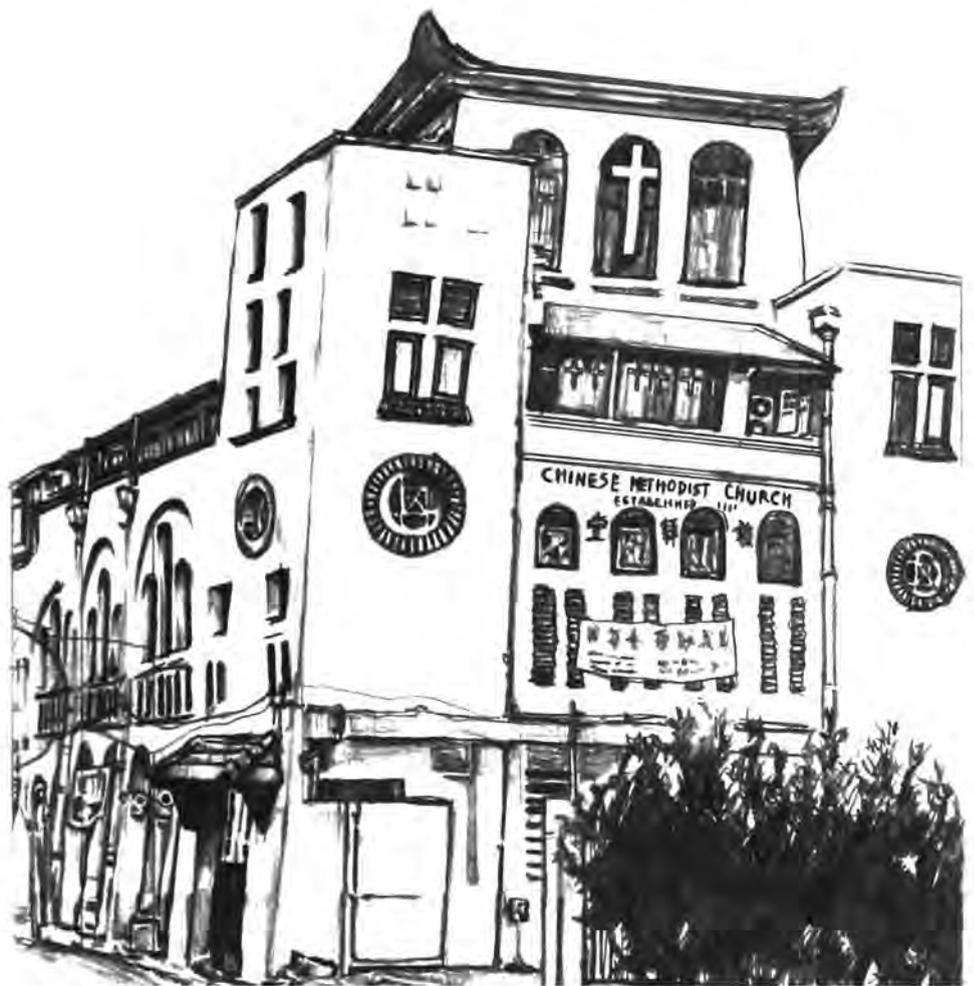
There were three alternative streams of architectural development in Singapore's post-war architectural history. They allowed architects to engage larger groups where they could develop ideas, and even meet potential clients. This article focuses on three of these groups – the Nanyang community, Malayan nationalists and the SPUR group – and their associated architectures.

Nanyang Architecture 1920s-1960s

Pre-war Singapore was a magnet for Chinese migrants who referred to the region as 'Nanyang', meaning the 'South Seas'. In the 19th century, they overtook the native Malays to become the largest community, forming 75% of the population. Among the Chinese, a select group was English-educated, culturally oriented towards the West, and loyal to the British crown. However, the majority developed a strong identity as Chinese nationals, maintained links with China through modern media and communications, and sent their children to Chinese-medium schools.



Chinese shophouses



Telok Ayer Methodist Church

Architecturally, the Chinese presence in Singapore was seen in their traditional mansions and temples, as well as the hybrid 'shophouse', which was partly based on the Chinese courtyard house. In addition, a hybrid of Chinese and Modern architecture – 'Nanyang' – was developed between the 1920s and 1960s.

Major Nanyang buildings included Chinese clan houses, the Telok Ayer Methodist Church, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and Nanyang University, which was the first Chinese university outside China. The university epitomized the educational aspirations of the China-oriented community, and a desire to promote Chinese language and identity as compatible with the modern world. This desire also influenced its architectural form.

Built in the mid-1950s, the Nanyang University library combined a reinforced concrete structure with a neo-classical triple-bay façade, and Chinese elements such as roof bracket supports and glazed green roof tiles.



Nanyang University library

After the University opened, but without referring directly to it, Seow and his co-editors at the local architectural journal expected architects and designers to be anxious over the application of “superficial motifs – such as Chinese or Malay details – in an attempt to be ‘Malayan’.” They also urged discrimination “between spurious stylism and legitimate style. In the cause of a national architecture, we should expect... quality and integrity.”^{viii}

In Seow’s view, the building’s Chinese elements were arguably appropriate for its client, but the design was ultimately illegitimate. Traditional ornament was applied on a modern building without any apparent relationship to its materials or method of construction. This contravened basic ideas about Modern design.

If this building lay beyond the discourse of its day, how was it produced? Its designer was the late Ng Keng Siang, a pioneer Chinese-Singaporean architect favored by Chinese clients over white expatriates. Seow describes Ng as a ‘businessman-architect’, preoccupied with clients rather than design, which was left to his draftsmen.^{ix} While Ng also produced the similar Teochew Building in 1947, he is better known for his Ngee Ann Apartments and Art Deco Asia Insurance building. Ng does not provide us with many clues to the origins of the design for the library.

The key to the library’s architecture appears in one of the University’s publications, which says its ‘design and institutional character’ was “modeled after the best modern university in China”, a reference to Amoy University, founded in the 1920s by Tan Kah Kee, a Chinese-

Malayan millionaire. Scholars Chiang Bo-Wei and Chi Chang-Hui explain that Tan innovated an architectural style called *yang zhuang wan mao* (Western dress with a Chinese hat) for his campus.^x The similarity between the Nanyang and Amoy University libraries is striking. Apart from the similar roofs, both have a central bay one storey higher than the fair-face brick flanking wings, and a Chinese style verandah on the third storey.

Chiang and Chi argue that Tan's propensity for this expression could be due to the consciousness of his own hybrid identity of being China-born, yet resident overseas. "Tan's hybrid style echoed the famous statement, *zhong xue wei ti xi xue wei yong*, which means using Chinese knowledge as the body, and applying Western knowledge to it, an attempt to resolve the contradictions between tradition and modernity stemming from the early Republican period's May Fourth Movement." Nanyang University therefore traces its architectural and institutional roots to the Chinese reform and modernisation movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These were part of China's struggles to reconcile Modernity with the weight of her traditions.

Despite their Chinese ancestry, most Singapore architects and critics were not attuned to these traditions or struggles. Instead, they belonged to the small Western-oriented elite. Australian-educated Seow and the rest of his peers could not appreciate Nanyang architecture as part of a very different intellectual and historical trajectory. They could only understand it as a 'misguided' form of Modern architecture.



OCBC Bank



Old OCBC building

By the 1970s, Nanyang architecture went into decline due to falling support from its traditional advocates. This was symbolized by the replacement of China Building,^{xi} a Nanyang-style Chinese bank, with OCBC Building, an International Style skyscraper built by I. M. Pei in 1975 for the same client. The choice of the prominent Chinese-American architect marked a turning

point from, on the one hand, the adaptation of modernity to suit a Chinese cultural context, to, on the other hand, the appropriation of International Style modernity to address a wider national and international audience.

We will return to the reasons for a shift to the International Style, but first we will consider another stream of development: the search for a Malayan national architecture.

Malayan Architecture 1950s-1960s

In the pre-war period, the British ruled the different States of the Malay Peninsula, including Singapore, which were collectively known as 'Malaya'. As part of post-war decolonization of the British Empire, Malaya achieved independence in 1957. Partly due to fears that its large Chinese population would upset the delicate ethnic balance in Malaya, Singapore was separated and made a self-governing British protectorate. An island about 12 times the size of Manhattan, Singapore was considered too small to be a viable independent nation. Singapore's PAP (People's Action Party) State government argued that the island's economic and political destinies were tied to Malaya, and advocated merger as the only way to secure independence from Britain. This was achieved in 1963 when Singapore merged with Malaya to form a new nation, Malaysia.

In common with other post-colonial societies, local artists and architects in the 1950s and early 1960s searched for a national, Malayan, identity in their work. At the same time, it was evident to architects imbued with Modern ideals that a national architecture must be true to values such as rationality, integrity and the avoidance of *superfluous ornament*. As in the case of Nanyang University, this was a source of much anxiety and debate. A more legitimate approach was to modify Modern architecture by making it responsive to the local tropical climate, focusing on scientific issues of drainage, ventilation, etc..

The analysis of climatic effects on architecture often drew lessons from indigenous Malay houses, which contained accumulated wisdom

on building in the tropics. This allowed architects to connect with Malayan culture without recourse to superficial or ethnocentric motifs.

Seow himself contributed to ideas about a national architecture in his manifesto-like essay, 'The Malayan Touch',^{xii} published in 1960. It argued for more attention to climatic concerns and proposed the selective and creative application of local ornament, materials and craftsmanship. While proscribing the imitation of traditional architecture, he advocated adaptation in a way that is 'useful' and 'apt'. Seow envisaged buildings that communicate to the observer their national context, through the light 'Malayan touch' evident in them.



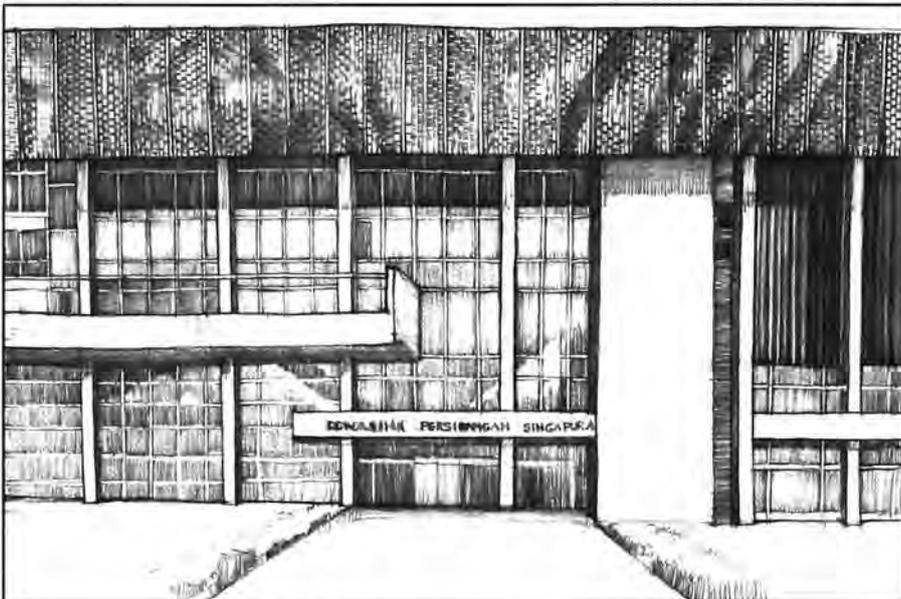
Malay house

Thirteen years later in his 1973 thesis, Seow distinguished buildings that were climatically responsive, most notably the 1965 Singapore Conference Hall, designed by Lim Chong Keat of Malayan Architects Co-Partnership. Referring to its lofty concourse, clerestory lighting and aluminum sunscreens, he said that the Hall was "an outstanding example of contemporary architecture", which "demonstrates the high competency and functional approach of some present-day architects."

Other prominent climatically-sensitive buildings were the Scouts Association by Seow himself, several Catholic churches by Alfred Wong, and private houses by Malayan Architects Co-Partnership. However, while praising their sensitive response to climate, Seow refrains from speaking in his thesis about these buildings as part of any larger effort to develop a self-consciously Malayan architecture.

Seow's sudden loss of interest in Malayan architecture between 1960, when he wrote 'The Malayan Touch', and 1973, when he wrote his thesis, can be explained by the events of 1964 and 1965. Ethnic and political rivalry between Chinese majority Singapore and Malay majority Malaysia escalated into bloody race riots in 1964. These traumatic events led to the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965.^{xiii}

Following this, the term 'Malayan' was expunged from architectural and other discourses. Malayan architecture blithely was not, however, replaced by the search for a Singaporean architecture. For Singapore, Malaya had always been more than a political ideal. Malaya's much larger population and thriving tin and rubber industries provided the markets and resources Singapore needed in a world where newly independent countries were pursuing import substitution policies. The loss of Malaya required a fundamental re-thinking of Singapore's purpose and image in the world, and compelled the island to



Singapore Conference Hall

strategically re-position itself as a global city with the world replacing Malaysia as its hinterland. Subsequently, the city-state opened itself to the industrialized world, in its search of markets, resources, capital and skills. As Singapore Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam articulated in 1972, Singapore depended on the "international economic system to which we as a Global City belong and which will be the final arbiter of whether we prosper or decline".^{xiv}

In this new mould, Singapore desired an identity as a pro-business, internationally-oriented modern city, an image provided by the International Style. Almost overnight, the development of architecture with national inflections became an irrelevant and unaffordable indulgence. Coincidentally, the widespread introduction by the 1970s

of air-conditioning also undermined the pursuit of climatically-sensitive design.

Singapore's economic integration with global capitalism was tied to the arrival of celebrity architects, beginning with I. M. Pei in the late 1960s.^{xv} More famous for earlier works built elsewhere, these celebrities delivered generic International Style designs for their Singapore clients, who abhorred controversy and desired conservative yet prestigious buildings. This trend narrowed the scope for local architects to produce more critical or original work. In the words of architect Alfred Wong, "no chances were to be taken with Singapore architects who were still trying to find the desired expression appropriate to our wet enervating climate or to engage in developing an ethnic heritage since this might remind people of the Third World from which Singapore had only just emerged. The instantly recognised forms of high-rise office towers best typify the desired expression of self-confidence..."^{xvi} By the late 1960s, the search for a national architecture had ended. Historiographically, the handful of experimental 'Malayan' buildings became subsumed into larger Modern architectural history.

Architecture of SPUR 1960s-1970s

The loss of the Nanyang and Malayan projects did not spell the end of local architectural innovation. Rather, they marked the end of identity anxiety as a generator of form. Where the ethnic and national were once the alternative frontlines of architecture, these were replaced by new issues and concerns.

By the late 1960s, architects shifted their focus to the massive changes taking place in Singapore. The PAP government had initiated the physical transformation of the island to make it more amenable to global capital. Villages, slums and tenements were demolished, and replaced by public housing estates and industrial townships. A new skyline emerged from the reformed landscape. An interconnected network of highways, seaports and airports connected these to one another and the wider world. The hallmark of these changes was the extensive use of modern planning and International Style architecture.

Some architects launched a critique of this transformation, focusing on quality-of-life and social justice issues. They were part of the wider global backlash against Modern architecture. They formed an organisation called SPUR (Singapore Planning and Urban Research group). SPUR had a core membership of architects, joined by intellectuals from fields such as economics, geography and law. Collectively, they were part of Singapore's intellectual class, who were chafing under increasingly illiberal political conditions. The collapse of a viable opposition, and curbs on the media, were symptoms of this trend.

In addition to criticizing the government, some SPUR architects used the group as a platform for airing broader visions for the city, and the theoretical basis of their built works. William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon were the two most prominent SPUR leaders. They were also partners in the architectural firm, Design Partnership. Key ideas behind the works of Lim and Tay were expressed in their paper, 'The Future of Asian Cities', published in 1966 in *Asia Magazine*.^{xvii}

In this article, the writers addressed post-colonial identity anxiety, warning that "we must not make the mistake of identifying the requirements of modern living and the process of industrialization with de-orientalisation." Having de-linked the Modern from the Western, they argued for high-density urban formations as appropriate for Asian cities. This was based on the population explosion in Asian cities and the fact that Asians were "conditioned to live in a highly concentrated manner." Contemporary issues of congestion, pollution, and heritage conservation replaced old obsessions with ethnic or national identity. The 'Asian' also replaced the 'tropical' as the regional level of identification. Aware that the city-state was in an uneasy relationship with its former hinterland, Singapore architects developed a regionally-oriented discourse, as a form of resistance to the hegemonic International Style.

The article goes on to advocate high-density, mixed-use architecture, and policy prescriptions ranging from transport to urban land reform. Its architectural ideas were later expressed in the design of both the Peoples' Park and Golden Mile Complexes. Their vision was of a



Aerial view of Golden Mile Complex

highly built-up continuum of buildings, arranged in a continuous linear urban development. Decks, podia, railways, bridges, and open spaces connect buildings to each other.

In particular, Golden Mile Complex which was completed in 1973, seven years after the article by Lim and Tay, bears a striking resemblance to the sketches that accompanied their article. However, Golden Mile stands detached from its neighbours and street, merely

the first piece in a vast urban jigsaw that was never assembled. It was apparent that such an ambitious urban scheme required State involvement. As the writers noted in the last line of their 1966 article, “no amount of ingenuity can make up for a lack of political leadership, for any planning action must be accompanied by a political decision.”

In the discussion of Golden Mile Complex in his thesis, Seow skips these political and planning issues to dwell on formal aspects, noting “the use of spectacular forms in exposed positions”. Yet, perhaps because of his own inclinations toward the tropical discourse, his overall assessment of the work is critical: “it is doubtful if it is functionally adequate, especially from the weather protection angle under tropical conditions of intense sunlight, heat, glare and rain.” Almost dismissively, Seow concludes his comments on the work of the firm by noting their use of dramatic form, “yet continually experimenting with their own theories.” Tellingly, none of these theories are described, let alone discussed.^{xviii}

By 1975, SPUR itself was dissolved partly as a result of pressure and opposition from the government, which was increasingly intolerant of critical dissent.^{xix} As Koolhaas observes, “the issues SPUR raises – history, context, community – are delicacies that can only detract from the process of modernisation and interfere with its purity.” As such, the works become, again, subsumed into the wider history of Modern architecture, with little sense of their importance as critical theoretical and practical experiments to develop an alternative to the mainstream modernity practised in Singapore.

Conclusion

Having surveyed some neglected streams of architectural theory and practice, questions remain as to how and why these were historiographically lost. While many of the individual buildings today have been recognised as fine works, the wider architectural approaches or movements to which they belonged ultimately failed.

The urge to forget these failed alternatives may have been an architects' defence mechanism to counter rapid historical changes, such as the acquisition and loss of national identity almost overnight and the sudden influx of foreign celebrity architects. Singapore architects retreated from the collapse of idealistic positions into the refuge of Modern architecture's first principles, particularly its emphasis on a dispassionate rationality and the avoidance of overt symbolism. Reflecting on his celebrated Singapore Conference Hall, Lim Chong Keat says simply, "if one is referring to the rhetoric about identity... we actually weren't too bothered about that. We knew the environment in our country, so we did not have to be overly self-conscious about it. It was natural, rather than contrived or trying to meet any rhetoric."^{xx}

Despite this retrospective downplaying of 'rhetoric', the evidence indicates that architecture was developing along 'self-consciously' alternative lines in Singapore, before these were ultimately extinguished, along with their place in post-war history. While the bolder ambitions of an earlier generation have failed, they deserve to be recovered. The ability to remember these alternative pasts can expand the capacity to imagine alternative futures.

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Ho Weng Hin is an architectural restoration specialist and architectural historian. He recently graduated from the *Scuola di Specializzazione in Restauro dei Monumenti*, University of Genoa, Italy with top honours. A member of Singapore Heritage Society, he has been involved in a number of publications, including *Rethinking Chinatown* (1998), and *Memories and the National Library* (2000). He has also been involved in research projects with various government organisations, such as the Centre of Advanced Studies in Architecture, National University of Singapore, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, DesignSingapore, and National Archives of Singapore. Ho was formerly editor of the professional journal, *Singapore Architect*.

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Illustration by **Sakulchat Chatrakul Na Ayuddhay**; **Pattanapong Varanyanon**; **Wilasinee Siangwan**; **Wunnaporn Siangprasert**; and **Parinee Srisuwan**

Endnotes

- ⁱ Seow, Eu Jin, *Architectural Development in Singapore* (PhD. diss., University of Melbourne, 1973).
- ⁱⁱ Prof. Seow taught at Singapore's only architecture school (originally at the Singapore Polytechnic, now at the National University of Singapore), which he headed between 1974 and 1979. Dr. Jon Lim later took over the local architectural history courses and based his coverage of the post-war period on Seow's thesis.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Seow summarized his thesis in an essay published in two landmark books. Singapore Institute of Architects, *Rumah: Contemporary Architecture of Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1981); Philip Bay Joo Hwa, Ang Choon Kiat, Peter Chen (eds), *Contemporary Singapore Architecture: 1960s to 1990s* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1998), pp. 16-23.
- ^{iv} This paper emerges out of a book the authors are writing, tentatively titled *Our Modern Past: Architecture in Singapore 1920s-1970s*, to be published by the Singapore Heritage Society in 2008.
- ^v Seow, Eu Jin, *Architectural Development in Singapore* (PhD. diss., University of Melbourne, 1973), p. 352.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- ^{vii} An important initiative in this respect was the three-year long Australia-Singapore research project, 'Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore', which culminated in a symposium at the National University of Singapore in July 2005.
- ^{viii} *Rumah: Journal of the Society of Malayan Architects* Vol. II (Sep 1959): 3.
- ^{ix} Seow, Eu Jin, *Architectural Development in Singapore* (PhD. diss., University of Melbourne, 1973), p. 353.
- ^x Chiang Bo-Wei & Chi Chang-Hui, 'Colonialism and the Formation of National Identity: Tan Kah Kee's Nationalism in Architectural Discourse, 1910s-1950s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture*, Vol. 5-6 (Nov 2003): 54.
- ^{xi} China Building was the headquarters of the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC), a Singaporean Chinese bank. It was designed by the expatriate firm Keys & Dowdeswell, and built in 1931.
- ^{xii} *Rumah: Journal of the Society of Malayan Architects* (1960). Republished in Singapore Architect: *Journal of the Singapore Institute of Architects* No. 218 (2002): 158-9.
- ^{xiii} For details, refer to C.M. Turnbull's *A History of Singapore 1819-1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ^{xiv} S. Rajaratnam, 'Singapore: Global City'. Speech to the Singapore Press Club, 6 Feb 1972. Published in Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (eds), *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), pp. 223-231.
- ^{xv} Celebrity architects after Pei include Paul Rudolph, Kenzo Tange, John Portman and Moshe Safdi.
- ^{xvi} Alfred Wong, 'A Brief Review of Our Recent Architectural History' in *Contemporary Singapore Architecture*, pp. 252-3.
- ^{xvii} Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group, 'The Future of Asian Cities' in *Asia Magazine* (May 1966). Republished in SPUR 65-7 (Singapore: SPUR Group, 1968), pp. 4-12.
- ^{xviii} Seow, Eu Jin, *Architectural Development in Singapore* (PhD. diss., University of Melbourne, 1973), pp. 380-2.
- ^{xix} Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa' in Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998), p. 1055
- ^{xx} Quote from an interview in *Building Dreams*, an 8 Episode TV documentary series on architecture and urbanism in Singapore, Xtreme Productions and Mediacorp Singapore, 2002.