Layering of History in Malaysian Modern Architecture through Analytical Diagramming

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The paper looks at the Malaysian Modern Architecture buildings of historical significance from the post-independence (post-Merdeka) period of 1950s by using analytical diagrams to examine their historical layers. The 1950s beheld an important transition of architecture history in Malaysia as the newly independent nation sought to formulate an identity through various enterprises, including architecture. The usage of these historical buildings has changed over time. Considering a building as a singular entity and ignoring its past influences diminishes its historical significance and neglects history as a continuous evolutionary pressure upon the building. As architectural history develops over time, it will have layer upon layer of its physical, functional, and contextual aspects affected by factors pertaining to socio-culture, politics, and economy. Visual representation is important to capture changes and to be open in anticipation of new layers that encapsulate the building’s reading at a certain point of time. The idea is to not only capture the momentous spirit of a building, but also multiple monumental and ambiguous changes that keep true to history. Such a visual representation allows an easy reading of the historical value and an open discussion through visual clues and analytical diagramming. In this study, we have selected the Modern building, Angkasapuri, as an archetype for interrogation via analytical diagrams.

Keywords: Malaysian Modern Architecture, analytical diagramming, layering, interpretive design learning

1. Introduction

In order to frame the contemporary debate of the usage of a modern building, a transdisciplinary approach via analytical diagramming through layering with a historical perspective is taken to explore post-Merdeka buildings that have endured notable or ambiguous transitions from one use to another or even losing relevance. The success and failure of Modern architecture and its possible
role in the future needs to be assessed against a complex background (Frampton, 1980). Most significantly, ambiguous transitions are primarily overlooked or discounted when it might affect the building in long term. The critical examination of historiography with the spinal narratives and sporadic narratives aims to underline elements of continuity throughout the period of post-Merdeka. Continuity in this research encapsulates the process through which the building has changed, ranging from adaptation, reuse, artistic interventions, and routine daily practices that may slowly alter collective understanding of site and relevant criteria. Coupled with the said criteria, the information is abstracted into a diagram. The information becomes organizational, looking to include formal, spatial understanding and programme. The variables in diagramming later include 1) space and event, 2) force and resistance, 3) density, 4) distribution, and 5) direction. Within this architectural context, these variables transcend conventional dichotomies. The configurations that are developed are subjected to continual modification and change, showing potential relationships to be develop among elements (Allen, 1998). Were these changes ignored and the changes imposed upon the building overstep the original version; we have already lost a fragment of the historical identity of it.

There is a displacement of understanding the chronological development of nationhood in architecture in reference to the history of these modern buildings origins and how it developed up to present times within the Malaysian Modern Architectural context. In retrospect, Modern Architecture’s canonical viewing centers primarily on the ‘Master Architect’ narrative, major movements, and exemplary buildings in Europe and North America (S.W. Lim & Chang, 2012). With this, there should be a critical perspective on the difference of early development of Malaysian Modern Architecture in terms of Eurocentric and Non-Eurocentric historiography and what it has become today, addressing both monumental and ambiguous changes. Malaysian Modern Architecture comes from a diverse and heterogeneous background and the study and re-theorization of it have made for richer debates and contents in historical subjects. The reading works of architecture from a purely historical perspective by photography and literature are not sufficient to formulate a thorough understanding of their chronological qualities and developments, specifically when pertaining to the more ambiguous changes. An analysis through historical layering of diagrams can lead to a methodical framework for its rich and subtle context to be extracted, discussed, interpreted, compared, and ultimately read for their contemporary use in interpretive design learning. This opens a way of new readings of the buildings that seeks to contribute to interpretation (Radford, Markoc, & Srivastava, 2014) and, iterating the importance of analysis in understanding methods of learning architecture historically from a design perspective.

We cannot discount the origins of Modern Architecture and its European past. However, this foundation is forced into the historical understanding of Malaysian Modern Architecture, when earlier it was argued on its diversity and heterogeneity. Malaysian architectural education is exposed to literature of canonical western works (Curtis, 2005), but not only is there a gap in relating the formal and spatial qualities analyzed in canonical Western works to the works of Malaysian Modern Architecture from the same period and framework but also in understanding the chronological historical transitions of the buildings themselves. In this paper, we look at the
main government telecommunications building, Angkasapuri, as a reference for its significant chronological changes and how it was influenced and affected by contextual factors.

This leads to a gap in the research where influences over the building’s lifespan within the context and content of the building are discounted, as there are in the assimilation and interpretation or re-interpretation in the works that were built during the post-Merdeka period. It relies on factual recollection concerning historical and significant individuals through interviews and recordings involved in the conception of the building. Layering analytical diagramming aims to capture a chronological reading of historical value of the building through visual clues, understanding architecture history from a design point of view, and encouraging interpretive design learning application.

2. Methodology

2.1 Identification and Literary Investigation

A Malaysian Modern building was assigned to the student group. The students identified the building as is for its formal and spatial architectural understanding without accounting for the influences of the context. This is to identify criteria of Modernism, measure it against the Western tenets, and compare it to Malaysian Modernist tenets. The students then find literature to analyze the history of the building, in this case, Angkasapuri.

The literacy and photo evidence of post-Merdeka buildings are abundant, yet the dissection of information in terms of design language are few. Prior to identification of buildings that have gone through changes in terms of adaptation, reuse, artistic interventions, and routine daily practices that may slowly alter collective understanding of site, understanding of the evolution of Eurocentric Modern Architecture is explored. This is to formulate the connection between Western-centric Modern Architecture and its arrival and transcendence into Malaysian Modern Architecture and its role of development in Malaysia’s nationhood. The background literature forms the basis of investigation; data collected is used for an in-depth knowledge of the subject of study. The advantage of the method allows for a synthetical comprehension as well as availability and accessibility of information as having an accurate and thorough representation of findings to analyze (Roslan & Anuar, 2018).

2.2 Field Studies

The students proceeded to visit the site of Angkasapuri to collect information unattainable via literary means. Informal interviews were conducted with employees and exploration of the building was done. First-hand visits were essential for acquired knowledge. From here the development of sketch maps, measurements, and drawings, recordings, and field notes that frame conjectures, in such a narrative, achieves the weight of an informed opinion (Groat & Wang, 2013).

The process encourages further comprehension of interpretive analytical thinking towards the contextual architecture that succinctly looks at the adaptation, reuse, artistic interventions, and events that alter the collective understanding of the site and building chronologically. In addition,
the main basis of information such as the architect, context, climate and structure to arrive to the conclusion of a layered diagram.

2.3 Layering and Diagramming

Diagramming at base understanding is a form of representation and condensed information in graphical form to show in depth relation of the design. It gives a different perspective, observation, and analysis, which at times are not represented well when other methods and mediums are used. Architectural diagrams apply a varied range of graphical indicators; for example; topology, shape, size, position, direction, emphasis, imagery, and others and these are subsets of elements and principles (Clark & Pause, 2012). In the case of this exercise, we look at a combined method using layering of graphical indicators comprising of elements and principles.

The base of the diagram, as shown in figure 1, is used as a point of reference and drawn on a muted opaque sheet of paper. The following diagrams, as shown in figure 2 – 5, in relation to the highlighted criteria are drawn on a separate sheet of paper that has a translucent quality. When all diagrammed criteria are combined and placed on top of one another, this shows a layered analytical diagram of condensed information of the history of the building.

The ideal outcome would be a singular diagram of a building that houses multiple layers of representation of historical changes. From here, the layering of history in analytical diagramming allows a visual representation supporting a proposed analysis, focused idea, and an abstraction for detail (Do & Gross, 2001). However, it can be argued that this method has an imprecise quality, but allows the exercise to have an interpretive design approach to a usually rigid methodology of learning history.

2.4 Interpretive Design Learning

Interpretive design learning and research was used. It intended to develop a form or method of documenting in analyzing and representing historical changes of the building; the students started with the collected data of Angkasapuri and documented the chosen Modern building through analytical diagramming. The students explored the building and identified ambiguous and hidden information behind a complex, interrelated, or multifaceted context and for the construction of an analysis in areas with no or insufficient priori information. The traits of the following are also taken into consideration; history bringing in a view from the past, interpretation, narrative, and considering a cultural turn (Groat & Wang, 2013).

As the research looks at the collected data to formulate a layering of Modern Malaysian Architecture history through formative and spatial ideas and also adaptation, reuse, artistic interventions, and routine daily practices that may slowly alter collective understanding of site, it is appropriate for researching context-specific, unique, and idiosyncratic subjects, events, and processes. This helps uncover compelling and thought provoking research questions and issues for continuous research and follow up.
3. Results and Discussion

The findings show, historically, Angkasapuri is multi-layered, elaborated, and complex in comparison to a singular image of its physical composition and aesthetics. The findings carry more information when combined with the contextual understanding chronologically throughout the lifetime of the building and reactions to socio-culture, political, and economic influences.

In interpreting collected evidences of the past of the building, the technical aspect of interpretation is applied to project a view and narrative through the prescribed methodology. As a result, it illustrates a layered analytical diagram that possesses hermeneutical qualities that allow for future conceptions of discussion and learning.

The example given in figure 1 shows the axonometric base of Angkasapuri in its original form from 1968, highlighting key principles, elements, and design of the building to be assessed and analyzed. In figures 2 and 3, the layering through analytical diagramming shows the documentation of a design understanding that states the growing and expanding of Angkasapuri through chronological expansion. Though completed in 1968, the broadcasting operations moved its office to the Angkasapuri Complex, which began its first telecasting in 1969. It is also important to note that this expansion is also due to the merging of radio and television under the Ministry of Information at the time. It is clear that the influences that lead to continued building and extension were due to the climatic change in socio-culture, politics, and economics in relation to the establishment of a growing nation. This is a result of higher demands and varying activities pertaining to distribution of information. Wisma Radio, Engineer Department, and Auditorium were built in the second stage in 1972, continued with the International Broadcasting Center completed in 1988 and finally Wisma Berita RTM completed in 2012.
Figure 2 and 3 Layering of history through analytical diagramming (chronological extension and adaptation) developed by Cheong Yen Sin

Figure 3 and 4 Layering of history through analytical diagramming (artistic intervention and space layout and usage) developed by Cheong Yen Sin
4. Conclusion

The layering in history of Malaysian Modern Architecture was an attempt at a methodology that encourages interpretive design learning. The value of design lessons from Malaysian Modern Architecture projects had little implementation in practice in the subsequent years due to lack of documentation of the processes and design intentions underlying their conception (Tajuddin, 1999). It allows the subject of the history of the building to be described and acknowledged to have an overlooked existing reality through multiple changes over a lifespan, whether monumental, ambiguous, or having less relevance. There is also a space of discussion of the building for a probable reality that has yet to exist through tracking the layering of diagramming history chronologically over the years in identifying a repeating or predictive pattern. For Modernism outside of the Western realm, there will inherently be an intertwining of nationalism, regionalism, globalism, colonialism, and other influences that define the understanding and definition of the context of the country involved. Through the methodology of interpretive design learning, there is room for the re-defining of Malaysian Modern Architecture through the relevance of geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural aspects without having to revert to the Western tenets of Modern Architecture, taking into account the convolution of influential aspects (regionalism, nationalism, globalism, colonialism) and modernism.

Historically, architecture history classes in Malaysian universities have always adopted Western tenets as a basis for teaching. Through observation, this might be the case of globalization, and lack of local knowledge and materials to formulate a syllabus or being unable to justify the importance of the transaction of local history within the Malaysian architecture.

What many fail to understand is that modernism is not a homogenizing process leading to a diversified socio-cultural fabric adapting to different contexts that converge towards a banal monolithic Modernism in reference to the tenets of the West. Rather, the processes of Modernism have led to a multiplicity of social and cultural formations that have confronted, contested, and diverged from the formulations of the West’s understanding and coining of what Modernism is in a Malaysian context. The prescribed tenets can be questioned and its implications of divergence do not mean that Malaysian Modern Architecture is any less authentic and regarded as any less Modern, hence layering of history of Modern Malaysian Architecture through analytical diagramming is crucial to allow an in depth understanding of layered Modernism.
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