Archipelago Aesthetics: The Evidence of architecture in Southeast Asia

For traditional philosophy a well-grounded piece of architecture is a source of delight and comfort; from this basis speculations on the very limits of thinking can safely unfold. This is to say that philosophy is metaphorically reliant on architecture. The most famous example of this is perhaps Kant's critical philosophy where the very form of his thinking is described in architectural terms. Literary critic J. Hillis Miller, like many others in recent years, is suspicious of the comfort a well-grounded piece of architecture offers. He argues that in philosophy geographical terms such as 'ground', and architectural terms such as 'architectonic' have had their 'original spatial and material reference [...] eroded as they have been turned into conceptual terms' thereby becoming 'subordinated to logical and rational thinking'. As a consequence such terms tend to operate unproblematically as 'transparent illustrative metaphors, handy ways of thinking'. Miller argues that this erosion serves a kind of paradoxical 'triumph of theory'. The 'triumph of theory' he argues is 'the covering over of that problem' of the distinction between material base and superstructure, it is the 'erasure or forgetting of the material base in question'. Miller goes on to describe his project, in his recent book Topographies, as exploring the workings in literary and philosophical texts of such terms as 'river, stream, mountain, house, path, field, hedge, road, bridge, shore, doorway, cemetery, tombstone, crypt, tumulus, boundary, horizon'. He asks whether such geographical or architectural terms 'have a function beyond that of mere setting or metaphorical adornment'.

Conversely, Miller does not aim to offer up contingencies as a simple circumvention of formal difficulties with representation; he does not suggest, in other words, that a return to 'the material' — as figured in various geographical or architectural terminologies — would operate as a bulwark against a supposed rampant textuality. The materiality Miller has in mind remains mediated by language. It stands 'for what can never be approached, named, perceived, felt, thought, or in any way encountered as such', that nonetheless 'is the hidden agent of all those phenomenal experiences'. 'Materiality' in this sense invokes a desired material world without ever offering an unmediated encounter with it. Nonetheless 'materiality' represents an interruption of the cognitive workings of meaning and hence should be privileged as triggering moments of (im)possible contact, or at least unease, between world and text. Each topography encountered in the literary and philosophical texts Miller chooses to read, in different ways 'hide an unplaceable place', and invokes the dilemma of materiality. The triumph of theory — as the blithe erasure of the material — for Miller is a triumph.
of thinking over reading. So a resistance to theory, he argues, must be enacted through a heightened reading practice, a practice he calls an 'ethics of reading'. Such a practice pays close attention to the workings of the material in the phenomenal experience of reading. So, terms such as 'river', 'stream', 'mountain', 'house', 'path', 'doorway', 'boundary' etc. are important for their orchestration of a unique referential circumstance in the act of reading itself. In paying close attention to the materiality of the text through this rigorous reading as 'a unique performative event', Miller aims to draw attention to moments which remain just out of reach of cognition.

Architecture and geography are key points at which the workings of theory might be interrupted. Architecture and geography are privileged zones of contingency in the transcendental space of theory.

Miller’s position is not unproblematic from our disciplinary point of view. His privileging of the activity of reading, however broad he imagines it to be, is inadequate when dealing with geographical or architectural phenomena — to say that a landscape or a built form might be 'read' is excessively metaphorical. But I want to by-pass this dilemma here in order to explore the dynamic between geography, architecture and theory itself in more detail. What I am interested in is the way such a relationship plays itself out in situations in which each of its components are strange. The situations I have in mind are certain European engagements with the islands of the Southeast Asian archipelago. This exploration aims, then, to transport Miller’s interest in the convolution of materiality and phenomenonality into a zone where the ground itself is not so obvious a category, and where the reading of order is a consistently troubling activity.

I'll begin this exploration with a reading of the geography.

II

In its Southeast corner, the stable land mass of continental Asia seems to break open. From the gentle moment at which Sumatra eases away from the underside of the Malay Peninsula, the geography spills Eastwards in a sequence of intensifying vortices and eddies intermingling land and sea in ever more complex relations. At first substantial and densely afforested island chunks hold in tangential formations and string out along the equator. Later these chunks themselves twist, contort and fragment into smaller particles. Eventually they froth and foam becoming almost gaseous in consistency and, beheld to no axial order, are flung pollen-like into the giant bowl of the Pacific. In a relatively short space the old continental mass of mainland Asia is transformed into the fresh ethereal space of the Pacific. Between the two extremes of this geography the archipelago forms an extended liminal zone, a snap-shot of a geomorphological explosion in which the island-fragments are held at a simmer, not quite boiling over. In this zone neither land nor sea dominates, instead island-figure and oceanic-'ground' continuously interchange so that a formal agitation confronts the cartographer's eye. Indeed, scan any pre-1960s atlas and this difficulty is graphically confirmed: whereas mainland Asia and the Pacific are represented as coherent entities each with its own formal legibility — terrestrial mass and oceanic bowl respectively — the extended point of inflection between them is difficult to see. 'Asia' and 'the Pacific' are usually represented coherently in the atlas format, as are entities such as 'the Far East' or 'Indo-China'. But insular Southeast Asia is most often found straddling maps on different pages, its agitated island clusters usually cropped and located on the margins of those more coherent geographical entities.

In the West, insular Southeast
Asia had long been known by such names as 'Further India' or the 'East Indies', and was thereby conceived as a kind of Hindu colony under the direct control of kingdoms in India. But during the Dutch colonial era a substantial body of evidence pointing to unique historical and cultural characteristics of the archipelago was gradually accumulated. Consequently by the 1940s the older terminology had come to be seen as imprecise and outmoded. The term 'Southeast Asia' came into general use around this time, and it articulated a unique regional identity, historically implicated in cultural and economic relations with India, but distinct from India and consequently fully reciprocal in those relations. However, once the association with the clear and long-established civilizational traits of India was broken, the characteristics of this regional identity were required to be thought anew. This process proved to be a fraught one. In a perceptive essay on Indonesian historiography for instance, Tony Day notes that 'Southeast Asian history produces [...] a kind of anxiety in those who study it'. Indeed, across a whole range of disciplines — whether it be sociology, anthropology, geography, cultural history or archaeology — Western engagements with the region from this time are beset by epistemological anxieties. Such anxieties are persistent because this engagement attempts to produce an autonomous disciplinary object in the face of it, a region, as Day goes on to describe it, which 'in so many historical and commonsensical ways [...] is not and has never been "autonomous"'. This production of autonomy in the face of a lack of autonomy, although developed in various discipline-specific terms, was articulated initially and most obviously through long and convoluted attempts to 'identify the region of study'. And this, in turn, was most often expressed through worries about the fracturous geography of the region. So, at the risk of sounding like an enviro-determinist, I want to invite you to imagine ( provisionally at least) that the pseudo-geomorphological and formal agitations we can read off an atlas map somehow infect the various scholarly engagements made with the region; as if that fragmented geographical image serves as an index of the difficulties the disciplines have in their engagements with insular Southeast Asia.

III

Architecture's place in this broadly cross-disciplinary anxiety is particularly interesting for two inter-related reasons: first, architecture rarely figures as an explicit disciplinary formation, and yet (and this is the second reason) architectural issues, themes and tropes surface in many of the other disciplinary debates. Architecture is impossible to place, and yet is thoroughly implicated in the articulation of a regional cultural identity. Of course, architecture could be said to be a key source of evidence in the production of cultural identity more generally. For instance many of anthropology's great ethnographers — Lafitau in North America, Malinowski in the Trobriands, Lévi-Strauss in South America, Radcliffe-Browne in the Andaman Islands — feature descriptions of built form at pivotal locations in their monographs, and, furthermore, the structuring of ethnographic evidence, as unique cultural wholes, are often developed around such descriptions. Architecture, then, could be understood as a keystone which holds together a vast array of traits, practices, behaviours and artefacts such that they are able to coalesce as an organic cultural form (or, more broadly, as theory). But in an environment, such as insular Southeast Asia, which resists formalization through its own lack of form architecture takes on an even greater burden in the proof and production of cultural identity. In other words, the already sanctioned relationship between architecture and
anthropology in general is heightened in this part of the world; architecture is interpolated into the field of anthropological culture in a more urgent and thorough way here. Two recent examples of this intensified relationship come to mind: first, Roxana Waterson’s book *The Living House: An anthropological study of architecture in Southeast Asia* is perhaps the best known recent anthropology of Southeast Asia. And she develops an anthropological account of cultural diversity in the archipelago through an explicit consideration of indigenous built form. The second example is Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones’ book *About the house: Lévi-Strauss and beyond.* This is a general text on anthropological interpretations of built form, yet it relies overwhelmingly on built form case-studies from the archipelago — over half of the essays in the book (six of ten) deal explicitly with built forms in the Southeast Asian archipelago. So if the geography of the region can be understood as the fractured grounds — literally and figuratively — on which the project of cultural identification unfolded, then the most powerful form of evidence wielded within it was architectural in character. Architecture and geography are brought into a particularly complex relation here, and together they are implicated in the discursive production of an indigenous culture. So to develop the imagined hypothesis a little further would be to add that, if a fractured geography effects a comprehensive epistemological anxiety, then architecture is required as a fundamental cultural surrogate to pull things together again.

IV

But a consideration of the indigenous architecture of the region from outside anthropology’s frame raises the possibility that architecture and geography play into theory’s hands all too willingly. It is as if architecture and geography are all too ready to collude, to have their ‘original spatial and material reference [...] eroded’, to be ‘turned into conceptual terms’, to serve as ‘transparent illustrative metaphors, handy ways of thinking’ about culture. The eighteenth century English traveller Captain John Davis notes that indigenous settlements in Aceh, Northern Sumatra — often the first Southeast Asian ‘city’ Western travellers encountered — were

> very spacious, built in a Wood, so that we could not see a house till we were upon it. Neither could we go into any place, but we found houses and great concourse of people: so that I think the town spreadeth over the whole land.

A French Jesuit, S. J. de Premare writing to a colleague in Canton, in 1699, makes the following remarks on the same ‘city’:

> [i]magine a forest of coconut trees, bamboos, pineapples and bananas, through the midst of which passes quite a beautiful river all covered with boats; put in this forest an incredible number of houses made of canes, reeds and bark, and arrange them in such a manner that they sometimes form streets, sometimes separate quarters; divide these various quarters by meadows and woods: spread throughout this forest as many people as you see in your towns, when they are well populated; you will form a pretty accurate idea of Achen [Aceh] and you will agree that a city of this new style can give pleasure to passing strangers [...] Everything is neglected and natural, rustic and even a little wild. When one is at anchor one sees not a single vestige or appearance of a city, because the great trees along the shore hide all its houses”.

The ‘wild’ spatiality of this Indonesian ‘urbanism’ is also attested to by John Crawfurd in the nineteenth century: ‘a town, even when it consists of many thousand inhabitants, is no more than an aggregate of villages’. As Anthony Reid notes, in his essay ‘The structure of cities in Southeast Asia’, these impressions are made despite the fact that the urban conglomerations of
Southeast Asia were amongst the largest in the world during the seventeenth century. He concludes that '[i]n approaching the Southeast Asian city we may be wise to shed most of our preconceptions about how a Renaissance city ought to function'.

Reid offers an economic explanation for this kind of rural 'urbanism': 'manpower, not fixed capital, was regarded as the principal asset which had to be protected in the Southeast Asian city', as a consequence, he argues, '[t]here was little sense of a specific area which had to be defended against all enemies, and no sense at all that the city was a different world from the suburbs and the countryside'. As a consequence fixed dwellings and land ownership were not regarded as high priorities. 'Except in the biggest cities life was based on the presumption of constant mobility'.

This ambivalence with regard to territory is also noted, from a sociological perspective, by Jan Berman. Discussing the nineteenth century administrative structures of the villages of Banten and Priangan, West Java, Berman points out that '[t]here was no mention of the village as a territorial organization at the time of the [Vereenigde Oost-Indische] Compagnie and, as late as 1857, the Resident explained that there were no desa [village] heads'. Villages were known rather as 'scattered settlements', and their social organization relied on principles of social mobility and elasticity. Like Reid, Berman concludes that '[o]n reading the old reports, one gets rather the impression that the Javanese countryside was in a permanent state of flux'. Berman argues that the institution of a standard village form — which entailed an administrative structure, clearly delineated village boundaries, and the fixing of finite bodies of population to specified places of residence — was a consequence of the implementation of the colonial policy of the Cultuurstelsel. This policy led to the comprehensive surveying of the whole of Java, and the allocation of all uncultivated land to the colonial state.

V

The grounds which were settled (geography) and the modes of settlement (architecture) are locked into an intriguing relationship here: they collude to generate a wild and unsettled urbanism. The values of civilization privilege permanence, sedentariness and form, and these values underpin the production of cultural diversity in the region. Consequently the ephemeral urbanism which emerges in the archipelago can never offer evidence of coherence, it can never support the values dear to the discourse of civilization.

This discourse was initiated in the colonial era and continued in many contemporary engagements with the region. If the epistemological anxiety which besets such engagements is to be productive in the postcolonial era, it must be turned to thinking at the limits of form and beyond comfortable autonomies. This would be to take seriously the possibilities of an ephemeral architecture and a wild urbanism. Both of these are inherently contradictory terms: architecture by definition is a resistance of ephemera, and urbanism is only ever 'wild' in a romantic sense. However, these terms are symptomatic of the kinds of convoluted and contradictory demands certain postcolonial conditions make of Western scholarship. In these circumstances, architecture can make the most of its privileged position between the material and the phenomenal if it is prepared to resist its allocated role in the triumph of theory.