



ASIA

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Asia

The most beautiful woman's name one can only imagine.

What we will do to this cinnamon-coloured beauty with hair as black as night, face burning with tropical fever, depends only on us, men. It does not only depend on the global civilisation preferred by the hedonistic men living with cool indifference, and not even on the today's repositories of the ancient Asian cultures but on all of us. We share one unique Earth and Asia represents a precious part of it. Is is neither less nor more than our future.

It is thought provoking how architecture underwent the process of developing from rite into art then turning slowly from art into sheer industry. It is the expansion of the building industry through which the dynamics of economy can be seen in the evaluatin of the current trends. However, none of the analyses tends to deal with what is being built and at what price.

Observing the large building industry investments I sometimes see the Earth virtually crying about the liquid concrete flowing away, the empty space of the cut-down trees, the concrete covering everything and the suffocating air-conditioned isolation.

Building processes could be carried out differently and that living architecture has a sustainable tradition in Asia. The question arises as is living architecture only one of the many kinds of options or has it got any alternatives at all in 2010?

If I ask my acquaintances whether they have read the classic work of Robert M. Pirsig 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' only few of them say 'no'. If my next question is about the second book of the author 'Lila' the answer is usually a shake of the head in amazement. Pirsig is not a talkative author. If he had wanted to add anything to the first book then he must have had the reason so I was happy and curious to start reading it two years ago.

He wrote about the Native Americans. About women, more precisely about a woman of easy virtue, Lila. Frankly spoken she was a nasty little slut with whom the author wanted to spend a night then he was wondering about the effects of that adventure. So we have arrived from the static and relatively easily comprehensible world of motorcycles to the laying of the philosophical foundations of the dynamic quality. I read the book through and I decided that it would haven been a waste to miss that woman. Lila - another beautiful name.

The philosophy of Pirsig composes propositions in the matter of creative thoughts and the cognizability of the world. He considers the traditions, the knowledge accumulated throughout the thousands of years, the abiding values of human cultures lasted in the course of time as static qualities while dynamic qualities are the dance, the graceful movement, the transient and soft beauty, the drifting of fluffy clouds.

I believe in biodiversity as the manifestation of the perfection of creation. According to my analogy applied to the human race the chance for mankind to survive the XXI century lies in the fostering of the multiculturalism. My statement is also true for the XXII century and the following thousand and ten thousands of years.

The recognition and experience that people in Asia approach reality with complete different paradigms from those in western civilisations, raise hope that cultural diversity in this huge continent can resist the pressure of the global equal-thinking for long. In my train of thoughts I am focusing on education. More precisely on the period when the method of individual study internalizes and although the choice of career is not decided yet the question is within sight. On the period of secondary education.

My first thesis is that our future and also the future of Asia will be like the creativity of the next generation. My second thesis is that reality results only from fate suffered personally and conscientiously. I define reality as the event with heavenly meaning having significance beyond the everyday illusions. I have always been a late-waker.

Singapore

Singapore advanced from the third world to the first world during the last decades. What can be the reason behind the successful fate of the island country near the equator? At what extent has the approach and environment of the public education changed during that time?

1947-1974 After the Second World War, considering it as landmark and the starting point of my studies, during the reconstructions in 1947 a typical school building had 20 classrooms with an office and an open roof at the side for a canteen.

Until the middle of the seventies a massive network of simple one-two-storey buildings following the same pattern were established. That school type came down to them as the legacy of the British colonial administration.

1973-1993 They developed their own set of standard designs and doubled the number of schools. They used several types of standard designs, there were 5 for primary and 4 for secondary schools.

1989-2002 They realised the importance and strength of the uniqueness of the environment. They started the transformation of the existing buildings already in the last years of the use of standard designs in order to gain unique image. In the nineties it was the architectural quality and the adoption of the up-to-date results of child psychology which were commonplace in design. The parameters of the buildings were defined while the architects were expected to come up with creative, individual solutions.

1998-2010 The organic integration of computer technology in education. IT Masterplan to each school.

It seems a successful direction working well at first glance. According to the general opinion computer technology is the highest achievement of the human mind. Those who set out into the world with that knowledge are not lost.

The environment of the school IT teaching, however, makes me wonder whether it is already out-of-date in the moment of its investment. Reminding of the dormitories of barracks workstations, desktop machines, desks and chairs surely designed ergonomically in a professional way are lined up next to each other. I am contemplating this environment and if I look at it long enough I can slowly recognise the future looming. This kind of education system trains well-paid officials bustling like ants in one-space offices. The environment is not challenging rather oppressing concerning individual needs. It is its sterile professionalism which declares punctuality being more important than creativity. This is one face of Asia.

IT technology itself is not improving in that direction. The first aim is the development of nomad network products worldwide. People can work in the several walks of life regardless of place, time or occassion. It will be still more like that in the future. It could be even more like that in education if we identify learning with playing and not with working. Learning in a creative, playful way is much more worthy of human dignity than drudgery.

Cambodia the other face of Asia can be characterized very well with the challenges of poverty. According to my experience the engine of innovation is necessity. I started to deal with the idea to work in Cambodia in 2007. I did not know much about the current situation of the country I had just deeply admired and loved the ancient temples of Angkor since my youth. I was interested in the past in accordance with the present. Amazement and obtuseness were my major feelings how the Khmer genius could turn into decay and self-devastation in the 20th century after those fertile centuries. I arrived in Siem Reap in January 2008. I taught at Samdech Euv High School as a volunteer of Royal Angkor Foundation. It was too short to understand what was happening in this area but the time was enough to feel the dynamics of the re-building of the country. It was not hard to decide to continue this unfinished work later until today.



I have a vision about Angkor. When a lively city it must have had a completely different look with it's thousands of citizens who lived their everyday lives among these extraordinary temples. Their dwellings must have been built from such temporal materials that faded away just like them. There must have been a public utility system of roads and waterworks that served the citizens for a long period of time. They were able to achieve something that we can only have in our dreams: they ran a flourishing ecological settlement. Now the living part of the city is long gone, only the eternal stone foundations remained. Just like after a fire, only here the rainforest and time were the devastating powers.

I am interesting to this soft, living face of the khmer culture, because I believe that in Cambodia such mentality will be the future, which based on the results of the medieval past.

The school where I was teaching is very near Angkor and is a late creation of the same culture that created the wonderful church-hills thousand year ago. Nowadays this territory suffers from lack of water in the dry season and is an area, subject to all the effects of mass tourism, influencing every territory of life. The post-civil war condition of the society, full of serious social tension and the donations from abroad, not always having a positive effect even if given with positive intention, under the burden of improvement programmes there is a generation, gaining back its own values and utilizing its own inner sources, who have an important role in forming the lifestyle of the following decades, which is the chance for a life deserving humanity. If this chance is determined by the defining paradigms of the way of thinking of European people than the aspects of environment conservation will be secondary in the future as well. But if the specific economical-moral view of Buddhism is really influencing social events as well as the institution, as a place of the training, then I won't have to return to Cambodia as a teacher but any architect of Europe and North-America, who is likely to try new roads, can come here to learn rather than teach.

Based on the answers given to the questions arising among the participants of the course in the school, but also based on my own experiences, the first step of our cooperative thinking could be the improvement of the conditions of cleaning and the place of meals. I am aware of the fact that improvements can only be realised step by step, I still think it is a very important that a basic idea, forming the starting point of any future step should be very clear from the first moment. This basic idea is reasonable in case it is connected to the traditions of the environment culturally and at the same time is arising on the ground of reality - it can be realized and operated in a long distance, that means it originates from the past, is born in the present and serves the future. It is all about our relationship with time, about the surely common basement which connects me, the person, arriving from 10 thousand Kilometres with the Khmer people.

The present buildings of the school are also designed according to Cambodian traditions, such as the shape of the roof, the ornaments of the ridge, the educational buildings made up of the reasonable spaces which all are represented on a similar way all over the country. These buildings are also related to the traditional Buddhist forms of architecture, that have roots back to several hundred years in the past.

I'm very interested in the relationship of Khmer people with the older architecture, heritage of the country, even more thousand years back. How can it be accepted in the present, how can it be integrated on the level of everyday experience and first of all: how can it be continued? While I deal with similar questions in Hungary, too, I have a good chance to get closer to the daily problems of the school with great accuracy, going back and forwards in time.

Materials

In old days only buildings sacred to God, such as churches were made of enduring material, such as of stone, so human shelters were born and dead together with their users. This theory is reflected in the material usage of the present buildings of the school, as we can see compared to the classrooms and the teachers' offices the buildings of the canteen and the toilets have wooden-structure, for periodical usage. However, lately one of the educational buildings, which was built for enduring time in spite of the strict requirements, collapsed, which means that the modern brick and concrete structures and tile roofs did not satisfy the needs.

Not comparing this theory to the realized result but at the same time accepting and following it, my own concept in architecture is based on the idea that utilizing the products of the average building industry there must be born a new architectural quality, equal or even higher than that of the long houses of the classrooms. The waste wooden church of the Jesuits situated on the bank of the river of Siem Reap can be a good pattern to follow.

Signes and shapes:

What organic cultures, like the Hungarian tradition and the Khmer culture, so wonderfully have in common is their unique ability to condense information. In the thousand-lingam-riverbeds, in the river-heads of waters supplying Angkor, the carved symbols in Phnom Kulen and Kbal Spean are actually thousand joni with thousand lingam carved in their middle. The square form represents the Earth, the circle stands for the Sky. On one of the sides of the square is the sign of the overflowing wealth, fertility. The semen carrying heavenly power flows into the sign of the Earth, the Earth opens up and gives birth to the impregnated seed, seedling.

These are the simple ground plan formulas the whole of Angkor was built from. We know that. But there is also something else we can only see looking at the world-water-map and it is also present in the concentrated drawings.

The Tibetan Plateau.

Tibet is nothing else but a huge natural water-basin. It is also called the Third Pole because the great part of the world's fresh water supply can be found there. With their amount the water resources of the Tibetan Plateau come third after those of the North and the South Poles. The water in the Poles is fresh water because it consists mainly of frozen rainwater. The glaciers of the Tibetan Plateau supplying the sources of the big South-Asian rivers are also frozen rain waters.

The place where the Mekong originates.

A city like Angkor can only be created by people who are in possession of so much knowledge of the world that enables them to condense the essence of their existence into a small statue. The overflowing square shaped vessel is not only a general symbol but a purposeful and powerful message created right there. That message may have been like this, now composed only by my humble words: our origin is linked to the river, which originates from the inexhaustible rich water basin replenished by the Sky.

I am working on a small, simple building designed for the school where I already taught for a short time in 2008. Schools in Cambodia were erected during the first rebuilding wave after the civil war and they served only for basic needs that time. Making the surrounding of the canteen cosier and prettier did not belong to that field so now it is being realised in a shed.

I am designing a canteen building which carries condensed information and its cornet-shaped roof collects rainwater making it accessible for both the students and the cooks who use the building through a three-level precipitating system. It is a mandala-plan overflowing vessel-system.

Rainwater is collected from the bamboo-bar roof first in the middle basin then from there it flows into the big clay pitchers placed in the direction of the four cardinal points. Rainwater is still collected in identical pitchers in the Khmer villages all over the country. In the rainy season storing capacity even of the pitchers is limited so I let the water running from there flow in narrow channels into a ditch around the building.

The fragile beauty and tranquil, peaceful smile of the Khmer Buddhist sculptures originates from the self-confident mind of the mental richness. It was neither money nor gold but water which formed its material basis. This is the soft and still tremendously strong, always dynamic classical element. It lives and sustains life moving slowly but endlessly even frozen in the waters of the glaciers. It is simply wonderful.

The method

Architecture is not an autotelic individual art but an ancient communal rite. Building itself will be a method of learning. I am not thinking of one sided hierarchical student- teacher context but a two sided flow of information. My aim is to find the way of rite and to experience it with Khmer students.



This community approach type of attitude is not new in the history of Khmer-Hungarian educational cooperation. Gábor Reischl a teacher from the University of Gödöllő developed the method of studying with the students at a very young age. The idea of wealth and poverty is always relative. But on the contrary the idea of quality is universal. Gábor Reischl looked for and found the most ancient layer of architecture in the building of relationship with people.

He planned two major investments in Cambodia in the 80s and 90s during the period of the Civil War. He designed clear buildings for Kompong Cham Agricultural College with the purpose to provide work for locals during the building and to provide school for the coming generations. He applied traditional structures which were familiar to the Khmer construction workers because of their culture. Beside the Hungarian architect 5 other Hungarian construction workers participated at the building of the 22 thousand square meter building who helped build the rustic structured buildings. Gábor Reischl's aim was to prolong the deadline of the building because he considered it as a kind of help to give work and wage for the participants.

My own ideas are based on the same men to men principle. In Cambodia there is no architecture education. In order to create such a form of education we have to start from the basic form so we have to raise the attention to our educational program. We have to position this idea in the real world so we have to institutionalize our enterprise. In the virtual world we have to plant the roots of this future school in order to make it live not only locally but globally.

Volunteers of Angkor Foundation have been working for years at Samdech Euv High School. As I had the chance to experience the cooperation with Khmer students I have decided to do it professionally. This professionalism does not exclude playfulness and there is no border for imagination. In order to imagine a building I need to see the people who will build them.

I can see smiling brown faces in front of me and structures made of bamboo looking like complicated forests. Central building standing on feet, patios where rain is collected in spacious shallow basins. Smaller forms which grow out of the ground so naturally as our hair or nails grow. A school which is built by the Hungarian master of contemporary Asian architecture, Hungarian wanderers and Khmer secondary school students for the future university students. Future will grow from the volition of generations.

When does the ritual of building start? With the decision when we decide where we want to settle? Plot or continent? Can we choose country and culture if we want to feel at home in the world?

To build something is good. To clear a piece of ground and make it even while we preserve the trees. We see how sunshine roams the plot. We examine it in rain and wind, at dawn and in moonlight. We examine it for a year. In the world there are seasons which we have to know very well for a ritual building.

For a year while we get to know the chosen place we learn how to respect those who live in the neighbourhood. If everything goes well they will get to know us. We could greet each other. By the time the building starts we will have had to have allies. A building means changes we will have some enemies. We have to know them, we have to make friends with them and have to make an agreeable compromise. Friends and allies can mean great help in these cases. After a year we will know what we want to build. I believe in this one year. Why? There is a simple answer: life changes and grows cyclically related to the Sun.

The building of the canteen is the first step on a long road. School development system was built two decades ago after the Civil War. It is time to create an operable model for the overcrowded secondary schools in the cities which can be an answer for the challenges of the growing urbanization. Today 2600 students study at Samdech Euv High School, in Siem Reap. Students study in 6 grades in the upper classes. The number of students who finish school is half of the ones who start the year. The population of Siem Reap is multiplied in the past twenty years. It is still not a metropolis but the number of workplaces related to tourism is growing. 2 million tourists come annually.

The symbiosis of Angkor and Siem Reap is remarkable. In the Middle Ages Angkor in its golden age was more city-like than Siem Reap today. Maybe this is why I feel there is a chance to create a development model in this area.

In Asia but maybe it is not an exaggeration to say in the whole world moving of water is the key answer for regional development. Where there is no water you cannot settle in the long run. Where moving of water is eccentric flood can be threatening so it is also hard to settle there. In the area of monsoon rain there is a thousand-year-old tradition to collect and use rain water in the dry months. The result of this adjusting-extremities- into-harmony type of thinking is unquestionable and unavoidable. If the regional development model does not follow this South-Asian tradition but wants to base the future on water bases which are under the zero altitude it will have results only in the short run. After running out of the water bases the stability of the temples of Angkor can be in danger because of the instable holes and this touristic dream will end due to lack of water.

In this situation lot can depend on the first positive examples. Samdech Euv High School is at the crossroads of Siem Reap Angkor International Airport and the number 6 main road. Because of its position it is a very important institution. Its playground is flooded annually during the wet season. The flood can stop teaching for days. This water has to be kept as water is purified in the sky and falls back as bless. I am speaking about Asia but through a slow extension of a secondary school in Cambodia. I am dreaming of structures standing on slim columns and a beautiful woman with black hair - of Asia. She is sitting on the ground pouring tea into a small porcelain cup. The steam of the fresh tea flies in the air and evaporates. I can smell its scent.

