

No Ruins: Demolition and Urban Modernity at the 21st Biennale of Sydney

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Abstract: *Presented across multiple venues from 16 March to 11 June 2018, the 21st Biennale of Sydney was the first iteration in this long-running contemporary art event to engage an Artistic Director from Asia. While the curatorial preoccupations of Mami Kataoka were diverse and open-ended, this review essay is concerned with the traces of vanished or disappearing architecture that were woven across this year's event and, notably, the issues raised by two installations engaged specifically with the demolition of post-independence architecture. Without doubt the precarity of modern architectural heritage is a global problem. Yet the artworks from Sa Sa Art Projects, presented by the Stiev Selapak collective of Phnom Penh, as well as the paintings and sculptures of New Delhi artist, Tanya Goel, revealed the extent to which an ambivalent relationship to twentieth-century European modernist design legacies combined with accelerated urban redevelopment poses unique conservation challenges in the postcolonial cities of South Asia.*

Keywords: post-independence architecture, demolition, modernity, heritage, urbanism, Biennale of Sydney

Regional Intersections

It was during a personal trip to Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur (KL), in mid-2018 that I paid a visit to the downtown precinct of Brickfields which, over the past two decades, has undergone a rapid transformation in character and density that in many respects typifies the patterns and impact of globalisation upon modernising cities across Southeast Asia. In the early days of KL the area was a central hub for brick making, later becoming home to the depot of the Malayan Railways whose employees were housed in the nearby rows of colonial-style units known as the 100 Quarters. Despite its vibrant multi-ethnic character, evident across the numerous churches, temples and shrines studded throughout the precinct, Brickfields is today known as Little India, the result of a two-phase government led urban renewal project the first phase of which was

completed in time for the inaugural visit of India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, to Malaysia in October 2010. While the meaning of cultural heritage is always contested and unstable, the rebranding of Brickfields into Little India speaks to the distinct psychogeography of postcolonial Asian cities where such struggles frequently become "a discursive space in which various actors negotiate their visions, beliefs and powers of influence" (Leung 2009, 29).

With its rich tapestry of sights, sounds and historical influences Brickfields is a popular destination for heritage walks. In this spirit, the primary reason for my visit that day was to seek out traces of its modern heritage; namely the former 100 Quarters controversially demolished in mid-2015 to make way for construction of the Sentral Suites, a flash new development set to comprise three high-rise modern tower blocks of 1350 serviced apartments and a catalyst for further property speculation in the area. As I arrived at the adjacent heritage protected Vivekananda Ashram (built in 1904 by Sri Lankan Tamil migrants), I surveyed the heaped mounds of demolition rubble flanking its fence and the sheets of green corrugated barriers surrounding the large urban void turned construction site across the road where the delapidated rows of the 100 Quarters once stood. Any hopes of locating physical remnants of the housing were quickly dashed, however, walking past the nearby SMK La Salle School I stumbled upon its outline on a public mural. Painted onto the school's perimeter wall was a multi-coloured graphic artwork depicting the gridded architecture of the 100 Quarters site created by students to commemorate the history of their neighbourhood and to brighten its streets.¹ A neat explanatory inscription on the mural summed up its function:

the hundred quarters are housing for civil servants. The construction of the hundred predates the shift of little india (sic) to this area. It is called the hundred quarters as it refers to the exact number of units.

Given that the mural had been painted in 2014, a year before the demolition of the 100 Quarters, its statement in the present tense was a jarring reminder of just how frequently the large-scale redevelopment of whole neighbourhoods leaves scant trace of their former uses. I took some photos and pressed on, wondering about the impact of these spaces of disappearance on the collective memory of the city.



[Figure 1] Better Streets mural project by SMK La Salle School at Brickfields with Global Shapeshifters Kuala Lumpur. Photo copyright Ella Mudie, 2018.

A short stay in Kuala Lumpur could only allow for a brief engagement with the Brickfields and former 100 Quarters site. Yet this encounter with the abrupt loss of modern heritage resulting from the intense pressures of capital accumulation and economic growth especially prevalent in the cities of Southeast Asia provoked deeper rumination on a number of artworks concerned with demolition and urban modernity presented in my home city at the 2018 Biennale of Sydney. It was a much remarked upon fact that this twenty-first iteration of the Biennale was the first since its inception in 1973 to engage an Artistic Director from Asia; with the highly-regarded Chief Curator of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, Mami Kataoka, taking the helm for the 2018 event. Assembled under the conceptual rubric, *Superposition: Equilibrium & Engagement*, Kataoka's biennale presented audiences with an "examination of multiple modernities and competing and colliding values" (Birnie-Danzker 2018, 6). The reference here to *multiple* modernities is apt. For if the extremely loaded term "modernity," with all its contested notions of linear progress, newness and the techno-utopian rationalisation of society along secular lines, polarises its detractors and champions in equal measure, its inherently pluralistic nature is at least one point upon which critics can agree.

It has been noted that contemporary Kuala Lumpur “bears the marks of multiple fragmentary spaces that have been created (and re-created anew) out of the constant interplay between its colonial past and postcolonial present and possible future” (Seng Guan 2014, 9). A similar concern for negotiating the complex tensions between destruction and renewal in the rapidly transforming metropolises of Asia was present throughout Kataoka’s biennale, which notably included two installations dealing specifically with the demolition of post-independence architecture. Under the direction of the Phnom Penh-based Sa Sa Art Projects, a suite of artworks connected with the recently demolished White Building in Cambodia engaged precarious architecture as a site for experimental art practices and the notion of the archive as an accumulation of social processes, performances and memory traces. By contrast, the multi-disciplinary investigations into the deconstructed post-independence architecture of New Delhi by Tanya Goel explicitly recalled and referenced the history of twentieth-century modernism. Here the modernist vanguard’s derivation of a certain creative energy from the *tabula rasa* of the pure urban grid was called into question by Goel’s reimagining of her modernist inheritances from the perspective of the postcolonial global South.

Art at the edge of uncertainty: Sa Sa Art Projects and the White Building

While the experience of decolonisation in the post-World War II era varied considerably among the nations of South and Southeast Asia it is nonetheless the case that the project of independent nation-building was closely linked with architecture across the region. Where Malaysia achieved its *merdeka* in 1957, the separation from the French in Cambodia four years earlier in 1953 marked the beginning of nearly two decades of economic growth coupled with a cultural renaissance in the arts and architecture. Integral to this rapid nationwide modernisation was an ambitious program of infrastructure development as well as civic projects constructed in the style of the New Khmer Architecture, a modern design movement led by the late Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann (1926-2017), and which merged the principles of European modernism with traditional Cambodian architecture. For better or for worse, large-scale architectural visions tend to “speak of the modernity to come” (Lee 2014, 75). In the case of Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, one of the key projects heralding the nation’s independent postcolonial future in the 1960s was the Bassac River Front Complex. This bold urban design scheme proposed to redevelop 24 hectares of reclaimed land along the riverfront into a civic precinct integrating low cost-housing with a cluster of cultural buildings, civic amenities and landscaped public space.

With the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime this scheme was only ever partly realised. The ousting of King Norodom Sihanouk in 1973 was followed by the destruction of much of the cosmopolitan capital. One key built structure,

however, were the 1963 Municipal Apartments – later known as the White Building – a 300-metre long multi-storied Le Corbusier inspired housing complex representing a then radical experiment in providing an affordable modern lifestyle to the booming urban population of Phnom Penh. Vintage photographs of the newly constructed white reinforced concrete design at first glance suggest a Bauhaus-style European architecture transplanted to the southeast of Asia. In fact, the design of the White Building by local Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap in collaboration with the Russian engineer Vladimir Bodiensky responded to the site and tropical climate of Phnom Penh in a number of innovative ways, most notably in its arrangement of open interior spaces allowing for natural ventilation in the heat. It is in this sense that the White Building was exemplary of the sophisticated contextual modernism underpinning the New Khmer Architecture of 1960s Cambodia.

Despite later becoming home to a vibrant community of artists, small business owners and low income families in the years following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, the White Building nonetheless suffered physical neglect and was deplored by many as an urban blight prior to its demolition in 2017. Its disappearance follows the fate of numerous other New Khmer designs recently demolished in Phnom Penh amid a wave of development and foreign investment sweeping the city.² Modernity, as Malaysian commentator Ooi Kee Beng has noted, is an urban process (2015). In the case of cities such as Phnom Penh, the adaptation of European modernist design to the local context was intertwined in the post-independence context with giving rise to “ideas of the modern Cambodian of the future” (Sereypagna 2017,18). In the new millennium, the widening reach of global capital is fuelling the demolition of large swathes of modern twentieth-century architectural heritage. While this is no doubt a global problem,³ Singaporean architect William S.W. Lim argues that in the economies of Asia, in particular, “the population today is going through a serious identity crisis and a process of de-identity or general de-territorialization” (2006, 134). As the built environment is closely linked with memory, the psychic impact of the liquidation of familiar cityscapes by multinational private interests combined with the placelessness of the information era (AlSayyad 2010, 87) is arguably experienced as an amnesiac effect in many postcolonial cities.

In the face of widespread urban transformation, an impulse to index and archive the city permeates much artistic production of the contemporary moment. This preoccupation with the past demands to be understood, however, not as reflecting a mere trend for nostalgia but as part of a more vital process of identity formation. The interrelationship between the emergence of vanguard art practices and civic concerns was evident in the White Building installation presented by Sa Sa Art Projects at the 21st Biennale of Sydney. As the first not-for-profit artist run space dedicated to experimental art practices in Phnom Penh, the founding of Sa Sa Art Projects in 2010 by the Stiev Selapak

collective⁴ was from the outset closely linked to the site and history of the White Building. Occupying a space in the building until its demolition, Sa Sa Art Projects provided an inclusive umbrella space for artist residencies, exhibitions, workshops and events that fostered a dynamic interaction between artists and the building's residents.⁵ The White Building Archive was also established to document the living history of a neighbourhood under threat and to record the art projects and performances held at the site. Just as the building itself once represented an experiment in utopian housing, the establishment of the Sa Sa Art Projects in the White Building as a base reflected a desire to forge a progressive artistic identity informed by the cultural richness of Cambodia in the 1960s, as distinct from a present context lacking in official support for contemporary art.

Given that Sa Sa Art Projects typically present work beyond the confines of the conventional white cube, the Stiev Selapak collective's response to exhibiting at the relatively formal institution of the Art Gallery of New South Wales was to create their own microclimate, a site within a site that emulated the dynamic atmosphere of the White Building. Here, a suite of short video works played simultaneously across four digital screens embedded among a grid of surreal photographic portraits depicting residents in their domestic interiors wearing masks. These were presented alongside architectural drawings, video interviews and the sounds of Phnom Penh transported into the gallery by way of a local radio broadcast. While the non-hierarchical, informal and social character of the installation successfully conveyed something of the unique conditions of living and working in the White Building, this drive to immerse the viewer in a living archive was also shadowed by the fact of the building's very recent demolition. A prescient reminder that in a world of perpetual change, the impulse to document is all too often the only constant or, as Boris Groys puts it in a tongue-in-cheek quip, "Under the conditions of modernism, destruction is the best form of conservation" (qtd in Fisher 2017, 182). There is something perverse in Groys's sentiment, and yet it nonetheless captures the sense in which architecture today is increasingly visible only when it is threatened and, in turn, mythologised in the afterlife of its disappearance.

While performing an archival function, the White Building installation it should be noted was not framed as mere homage to, or eulogy for, a lost monument. It demonstrated, rather, the capacity for creative reflection on the architecture of the past to perform a generative function in the present. This was especially true of Pen Sereypagna's suite of architectural drawings and video works, *Genealogy of Bassac*, 2015- ongoing, which perform a kind of urban memory work by exploring the historical evolution or psychogeography of the Bassac River Front over time. Semi-translucent colour images of the White Building applied directly onto a large timber table alluded to the workspace of a design studio. In a challenge to the ahistorical character or "present-ness" of the architectural plan, spectral images of peopled interiors and landscapes

collaged onto drawings and elevations documented the lived experience of the building and how adaptation by residents over time transformed the structure beyond its original design intent. This subjective dimension to the *Genealogy* was further deepened by the inclusion of video interviews with former residents, an historian and an anthropologist reflecting on the history of the site. As a trained architect, Sereypagna says his engagement with the Bassac River Front has taught him how “architecture and urbanism related to the environment around it and can overlay in one or several points” such that the *Genealogy* is intended as a “tool to evaluate the urban movement and its production for urban planners in the upcoming future” (Sereypagna 2014).



[Figure 2]* Pen Sereypagna, *Section [White Building Genealogy]*, 2015. Copyright and courtesy Pen Sereypagna.

Where the video interviews showcased in Sereypagna’s installation reflected directly upon the history of the White Building, other new media works documenting performances at the site revealed how the precarious state of the building lent itself to open-ended forms of creative experimentation. Japanese artist Masaru Iwai’s video, *The White Building Washing*, 2012, created during a residency at the site, typified the socially-driven and collaborative nature of the projects hosted by Sa Sa and their concern for breaking down barriers between art and everyday life. Iwai’s three-channel synchronised video emerged from a cleaning day organised at the building and films the residents mopping water

from the exposed walkways that continually flooded when it rained. The cinematic treatment of this mundane everyday task of mopping is both meditative in a ritual sense and comic as no amount of mopping is enough to stem the tide of water. Given the poor public image of the White Building as “unclean” or “dirty,” the attentive labour of this obsessive cleaning also rebukes the prejudiced notion that run-down buildings are not cared for by residents and that such neighbourhoods somehow benefit from their so-called “cleaning-up” by gentrification.

In the short two-minute video *Memory*, 2012, by Sok Chanrado, a young boy walks backwards through his former home in the White Building as he recounts his childhood recollections of growing up in the iconic structure. This effortless navigation of its labyrinthine spaces in reverse reflects his embodied memory of the building’s architecture. An embodied relationship to architecture was similarly present in the video documentation of a performance by artist Lim Sokchanlina, *Rock (White Building)*, 2011. Utilising a piece of building debris retrieved from a nearby construction site and transported to the White Building, the artist climbs atop a large cylindrical barrel on its rooftop. With ropes tied around his waist, the artist lifts the heavy rock high above his head in a balancing act while the ropes are pulled taut by his assistants in a tense struggle for control over his body. Finally, the artist collapses under the weight of the debris and tumbles off the barrel. In the background we see the Phnom Penh skyline with its composite mix of traditional architecture and modern development. The artist’s body under strain comes to stand in for the tenuous situation that the White Building occupied for so many years, the ageing product of a foregone vision of housing equality sitting on prime real estate in a city undergoing a construction boom.

Tanya Goel: modernist legacies, postcolonial futures

Not unlike the disappearing vernacular modernism of the New Khmer Architecture in Phnom Penh, the post-independence architecture of another key city in the South Asia region, India’s capital New Delhi, is similarly suffering from the lack of legal recognition needed to protect its modern buildings from demolition. In June 2017, the global design community was shocked by the clandestine overnight destruction of New Delhi’s iconic Hall of Nations, built for the 1972 International Trade Fair on the 25th anniversary of Indian independence, in blatant defiance of expert consensus on its significant cultural heritage value. The fate of the Hall of Nations is part of a larger trend befalling much of the city’s twentieth-century architectural heritage. In the decades immediately following independence from Britain in 1947, a great many buildings were constructed in the Indian capital to accommodate its newly established government institutions. As many of the country’s key architects had trained in Europe, the influence of Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus and the International Style was keenly felt and as such the design of residences

and public buildings in the modernist idiom was intended to express notions of hope, progress and democracy, lending physical form to the confidence of a young nation.

In response to the destruction of such sites as the Hall of Nations, the World Monument Fund recently added the post-independence architecture of New Delhi to its list of vulnerable modern sites on the 2018 World Monuments Watch. Increasingly, the design community is called upon to play an activist role in advocating for the protection of modern heritage from demolition in the cities of Asia and beyond while for artists, the tensions surrounding the losses that often result from urban renewal can be fraught. Just as the experimental art practices of Sa Sa Art Projects were mutually intertwined with the precarious state of the White Building, another presentation at the 21st Biennale of Sydney raised pertinent questions about the complex interplay between the forces of destruction and creativity that bind artists to the cities in which they live and work. Drawing upon the formal language of modernism whilst incorporating the materials of demolished post-independence New Delhi architecture, the paintings and installations of contemporary Indian artist, Tanya Goel, spoke to the ambiguous role of contemporary art in responding to urban change when viewed from a distinctly postcolonial context.

Born in New Delhi in 1985, Goel's practice takes as its starting point notations of "wanderings, variations of the city's dwellings and blueprints of its architectures" (Goel 2018) and is attracting international recognition for its formally and conceptually rigorous reworking of the pictorial conventions of high modernism. Having completed part of her studies in Chicago and later residing in New York before returning to New Delhi in 2012, it was during her time in the United States that Goel became attuned to the differences between the Cartesian grid urbanism of American cities as distinct from the more organic labyrinthine spaces of India. An attendant preoccupation with the impact of the structure of cities on our perception of space ensued and, since returning to New Delhi, the artist has been further influenced by the accelerated pace of development in the city, in particular the disappearance of the modernist architecture that forms an integral part of its multi-textured postcolonial history. Thus Goel's recent work combines a formal interest in grids and the pictorial concerns of such modernist forebears as Josef Albers, Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin – with a distinctly material investigation into the deconstructed architecture of New Delhi.

For the Biennale of Sydney, Goel presented two large greyscale grid paintings alongside several sculptural pieces comprising miniature graphite drawings applied onto found debris collected from the demolition sites of houses built from 1950 to 1970 in Delhi; and a site-specific wall drawing created from neel blue chalk pigment and the cotton construction thread commonly used by architects to mark water lines. The grid paintings were perhaps most explicit in their revelation of modernist influences and

simultaneously the artist's detouring impulses, her concern for turning around the conventions of the grid as a means of reflecting upon its contradictions as a system of ordering space – urban and otherwise. For Rosalind Krauss, the grid was central to the myth of the modernist artist's vanguard assertion of originality in so far as the “absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative” (1986, 7). The apparent purity and disinterestedness of the grid that Krauss deconstructs as a fiction does not, however, negate its relevance. On the contrary, it is precisely this tension between originality and repetition so paradoxically enacted by the grid that warrants closer scrutiny.

At first glance, the dense gridwork of Goel's paintings *Carbon [frequencies of x, y axis]*, 2017, and *Carbon [extension lines]*, 2017, impress the viewer with a coolly minimalist pictorial surface and restrained colour palette. Upon closer inspection, however, a conception of the grid unfurls that is neither pure nor disinterested. In a material sense, oil paint is mixed with concrete, coal, aluminium and mica, resulting in a rich palimpsest of textures and allusions to the construction sites of the city. The pixelated quality of the grids belies the intensive hand labour of their making revealed in visible brushstrokes and an ever so slight bleed between edge lines. In their visual cacophony, then, the “impure” *Carbon* grid paintings capture something of the essence of Indian urbanism – the busy, chaotic and multi-layered nature of its cities or the “fuzziness” that one finds in Indian cities in which Goel has spoken of the struggle to delineate where the street ends and a person's dwelling begins (Pillai 2016). Notations in pencil drawn directly onto the paintings record information about the origin of the pigments and thus further complicate the non-referential nature of the grid as it was once conceived by the twentieth century avant-garde (Krauss 1986).

In its distinct preoccupation with indexing the vulnerable architecture of the post-independence era through a modernist lens, Goel's practice speaks to the challenge of reimagining the visual language of modernist abstraction, with its problematic claims to universality, in a postcolonial context. This is especially evident in the *Fresco on cement and stone* wall sculptures, in which Goel applies small graphite grid drawings redolent of Indian miniatures in their tiny scale onto building site debris salvaged from demolished modernist houses around New Delhi. The reuse of building rubble bearing the patina of urban decay on one level speaks to the defeat of architectural modernism's lofty concern for endurance and the inability of so many of its structures to withstand the profit-driven cycles of obsolescence and replenishment that now drive urban development in the twenty-first century. At the same time, there is hope and optimism in the quiet beauty of Goel's miniature grids ever so delicately applied to the refuse of concrete and stone. No matter how intertwined the history of modernism in Asia with painful histories of colonial

interference, violent struggle and occupation, the practice of archiving the city nonetheless provides a vital link to the past that preserves cultural memory and orients the self in the face of a disconcerting pace of change.



[Figure 3]* Tanya Goel, *Fragment*, collected from C.P.W.D housing projects, New Delhi, 2017, pencil and ink drawing on demolition site debris, 5 x 4 inches. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

Reflecting upon the modernist vision of Le Corbusier and his contemporaries, William S.W. Lim argues that what was once productively based on the “the advancement of modern science and technology” has, in the post-war decades, become “progressively distorted by commercialism, and lost much of its original dynamism” (1998, 128). While one should be wary of making generalisations given that each country has its own laws and regulatory framework governing urban development, the artworks presented at the 21st Biennale of Sydney forming the subject of this review essay nonetheless reveal a shared overlapping concern for the hyper-accelerated patterns of destruction and renewal unfolding across many cities in Southeast Asia. The destruction of buildings of significant historical value such as the White Building in Phnom Penh, or the 100 Quarters in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, raise important questions about spatial justice, the right to the city and the impact of wholesale demolition upon cultural memory and local identity.

By way of conclusion it is worth emphasising that it has not been the intent of this review essay to assess the success or efficacy of the 21st Biennale of

Sydney as a whole but rather to unpack one of its constituent parts – the prevalence of demolished architecture – as a means of interrogating what this preoccupation might reveal about the tensions over preservation and urban redevelopment currently unfolding across the region.⁶ The inclusion of multiple artworks dealing specifically with the fate of post-independence architecture in the capitals of South Asia may have occurred by curatorial design or coincidence. Either way, their presentation illuminates how the debate over conservation of modern twentieth-century architectural heritage is complicated in postcolonial cities by an ambivalent relationship to European modernist and colonial legacies combined with an environment of fast-tracked development that frequently unfolds with an accelerated pace that outstrips its western counterparts. As such, the Biennale artworks highlighted in this review offer rich examples of the close interrelationship between artmaking and the urban context in the art of Southeast Asia. In turn, such practices often take the form of praxis, contesting the notion of the city as a *tabula rasa* in order to raise new possibilities for reshaping the city with a greater level of historical consciousness.

Acknowledgement

* Permissions to reproduce Figure 2 and Figure 3 in this essay have been obtained by the author.

Notes

¹ The SMK La Salle mural project, known as “Better Streets,” was initiated by Global Shapers Kuala Lumpur (GSKL), a not-for-profit organisation affiliated with the World Economic Forum.

² Significant examples of New Khmer Architecture recently demolished in Phnom Penh include the Preah Suramarit National Theatre and the Council of Ministers Building, both levelled in 2008.

³ The international scope of the online database, #SOSBrutalism, now containing more than 1000 threatened Brutalist structures from around the world, and the growing number of modern sites on the World Monuments Watch Fund, is typical of the global focus of many contemporary campaigns to conserve twentieth-century architectural modernism.

⁴ The participating artists from the Stiev Selapak collective at the 21st Biennale of Sydney were Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, Vuth Lyno and Pen Sereypagna.

⁵ Subsequent to the demolition of the White Building, Sa Sa Art Projects continues to operate as an artist-run initiative from a new studio location in Phnom Penh.

⁶ Other projects at the Biennale concerned with demolition included *Ruins of the Intelligence Bureau*, 2015, by Chia-Wei Hsu, which dealt with the ruins of a demolished former CIA headquarters in North Thailand. The material investigation into

demolition rubble by the Superposition Studio engaged the relationship between development, displacement and social justice in Sydney.

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