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SRI LANKA



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ENGINEERS (SINGAPORE)



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LI XIAODONG ATELIER (CHINA)



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DESIGNING LIKE THEY GIVE A DAMN.

Writer Yishan Lam reviews this year's ArchiFest, organized by the *Singapore Institute of Architects*, and feels the pulse of the architectural body at large.

In light of the economic downturn and its effect on the architecture industry, the theme of this year's ArchiFest, 'Architecture for Humanity,' represents a clarion call to return to and rethink the fundamental values of the profession.

Organized by the Singapore Institute of Architects for the third year running, ArchiFest saw members of the architectural fraternity putting aside their pens and plans to converge on a point of reflection and debate as to the future of the built environment, even as the economy appears to be on the upswing.

'Architecture for Humanity' (no doubt inspired by the nonprofit organization founded by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr) was expressed in an umbrella of 44 events that included the annually anticipated Forum, exhibitions, architecture tours, competitions, workshops, book launches and fringe events that engaged with the theme on a number of levels.

This year's edition featured a groundswell of architectural competitions: first, an open photography competition that invited participants to respond to the theme, second, New Ideas for Recyclable Housing



MASSIMILIANO FUKSAS
MASSIMILIANO FUKSAS ARCHITETTO (ITALY)



TAM NGUYEN GHI
HIGHEND ARCHITECTURE (VIETNAM)



GERARD LOOZEKOOT
UNSTUDIO (THE NETHERLANDS)



JACQUES FERRIER
JACQUES FERRIER ARCHITECTURES (FRANCE)



THOMAS WONG
SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (USA)

-- a design competition that, organized in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity, called for ideas for a temporary or semi-permanent shelter unit, and finally, Operation Void Deck, an open ideas competition to imagine design opportunities at the void deck of public housing estates that would benefit the daily lives of the residents.

The competitions altogether seem to indicate that the eagle of crowd-sourcing innovation has landed in local architecture, as the ground opens for young designers and interested individuals to collectively imagine the future as the stakeholders of their own environments and communities. How such micro-level currents will reconcile with policy and planning decisions further downstream is, consequently, part of the wider challenge that was palpable across the event: how to holistically integrate top-down and bottom-up approaches in shaping the city.

Led by architecture students from the National University of Singapore, the ever-popular Architours gave participants an overview of recent developments in the local landscape across four themes: Hype Hunt, Superstar Architecture, Sanctuary Safari and Civic Chase, as an interpretative framework to the spectrum of new commercial, residential, and public structures that showcase the present state of local architectural innovation.

Also, the results of the National Parks – SIA Skyrise Greenery Awards were announced at the ArchiFest networking party, in celebration of successful sky gardens and greening of buildings.

The defining conversational event was, without doubt, the ArchiFest forum, featuring 11 talks attended by 477 participants from the industry, students and international visitors from the region and beyond.

The 10 invited speakers, plus a special talk on the late Carlos Scarpa's exhibi-

tion, presented a scintillating buffet of professional work, creative endeavors and process-sharing, showing the distinct approaches of each practice.

The Forum was also a telling juncture at which emergent values of the next generation of architectural values and approaches could be glimpsed.

Refracted through the diverse cultural and economic backgrounds of the speakers and their practices, a few streams of thought demonstrated the plethora of interpretations possible with regards to 'Architecture for Humanity': from a bottom-up collective approach motivated by community transformation, to the integration of humanistic needs with technological innovation, and to modernist interpretations of vernacular expression from locally-rooted perspectives.

Striking off the first notes, Dr Liu Thai Ker reflected on the role of the architect and urban planner, imagining the field as a total stage upon which different parties enact their ratios of responsibilities towards a city's livability. In light of his influence over the urban landscape as former chief executive of the Housing Development Board (1979-89) and URA (1989-92), his presentation gave 'Architecture for Humanity' a measure of historical resonance.

Offering another local perspective, architect Aamer Taher presented a span of local housing projects over the past decade that demonstrated his take on building for the tropics and designing for the Singaporean residence, and ruminated on his path through architecture, and maintaining human sensibility in the computer age.

The range of international architectural practices featured at the Forum arced from high to low technology strategies towards a humane architecture, whether pertaining to use, livability or humanistic expression.

Echoing the humanistic yet hyper-technological bent, Jacques Ferrier meditated on the 'sensual city,' the synthesis of technological innovation with sustainable

architectural value and practical uses. Solar panels, for instance, are integrated into the structure, allowing people to read what the building is doing. His firm's French Pavilion for the upcoming Shanghai Expo 2010 summarized important things about the sensual city: hybridizing nature and synthetic material, the building offers a contemporary interpretation of Versailles in a metropolitan, 21st century context with a vertical garden that flows from the exterior into the gallery experience.

There was UNStudio, represented by Gerard Loozekoot, who demonstrated how computer technology could be utilized to execute deep planning and research strategies that would ultimately enhance and animate urban dynamics. Across projects such as the Mercedes Benz museum in Stuttgart and a music theatre in Graz, high level analytic processing of local knowledge and cultures were incorporated into the design strategy, whether enhancing human connectivity in the design of public structures, pushing the limits of structural engineering to postulate a future for the use of concrete, designing for a full life cycle in mass housing projects, or creating the right atmosphere for collaboration and information transfer in an office environment.

Offsetting the humanistic strand of technological innovation were Massimiliano Fuksas' dramatic studies in emotion and personal expression through heroic architectural gesture. Performing stunning feats in form and material for a selection of projects from art museums to research centres, Fuksas' oeuvre of undulating surfaces, draping glass and sculptural features stand out, as they do in their own skylines, as artistic statements.

On the other end of the spectrum, the regional architects seemed to espouse vernacular, organic approaches that harnessed the power of micro-interactions and research processes to transform communities.

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PHOTOS BY YISHAN LAM

Chevadurai Anjalendran’s modest, studied architecture projects, numbering over a hundred over the years, intertwined the natural and manmade into outwardly simple, everyday structures that respected the environment as well as facilitated community. Coinciding with a book launch on his work, his talk was a lively glimpse into the integration of lifestyle and practice, through examples such as the SOS Children’s Villages over a 15 year time span, a house around a banyan tree, and orphanages where the children were involved in building and the architect charged no fees, to show that one could “have fun with little or nothing.”

Architect and academic Li Xiao Dong began with an eloquent critical survey of Chinese architecture and visual culture. Against a backdrop of bizarre propositions of old forms and cultural conundrums, and in a landscape where new ideas are based on the rejection of the old, as the result of China’s desire to enter the international community, Li’s research-based practice is set off in stark contrast, characterized by a quest for beauty, order and poetic response to context. Projects such as the Yuhu Elementary School expansion in Lijiang, which used local material and construction, the Bridge School connector cum social activator in Fujian, and Xu House at the foot of Yulong Snow Mountain in Lijiang, which takes the form of a courtyard, are studies in conservation and indigenous spatial concepts that demonstrate his ‘acupuncture’ approach to problem-solving, whereby constraints and opportunities are harnessed to come up with a fresh architectural language

that is contextually relevant as well.

Taking the idea of low-tech problem solving to another level, Patama Roonrakwit’s Community Architects for Shelter and Environment (CASE), founded in 1997, sees her doubling as architect-anthropologist, doing projects in difficult contexts: socially divided, politically complicated neighborhoods filled with the formal and informal urban poor. Illustrating her beliefs that people know the best how to solve their own problems, her remarkable, moving presentation of consultative slum relocation and upgrading projects were case studies of community D-I-Y triumph and self-help, such as the Ten House project in BKK. Through ingenious sleights of hand, such as showing images of resorts that have used similar materials to villagers in order to convince them of the beauty of their environment, and other disarming yet smart strategies, Roonrakwit was exemplary of what was described during the floor panel as “new visionary approaches to architecture” – dialogic, collaborative and humanitarian.

Thomas Kong presented his Beppu Project, a research process and ongoing project to rejuvenate the community in Beppu, Oita prefecture in Japan, by uncovering the hidden the desires of residents. Out of this, a small ecology of ideas was generated with the international project collaborators, consisting of 44 design scenarios such as movable green parking, a community kitchen, bike-share program and free trade station.

Tam Nguyen Chi presented a vision of Hanoi as an architecture laboratory,

to experiment how to meet increasing desires for modernity and sustainability in Vietnam’s urban living areas. Having taken refuge in France in 1976 and returned to Hanoi in 2008 amidst global challenges and a great sense of the mission, his work runs the gamut of high end projects, such as mixed-use, commercial and residential projects for evolving modern lifestyles, to more experimental projects that fuse low tech architecture and sustainable harmony, such as his Bamboo School in Nha Trang and a cultural centre inspired by three women in the padi field.

As Forum moderator Wong Yunn Chii, head of the National University of Singapore’s Department of Architecture observed later, there was a dichotomy between what he described as a willful determination of what a proper architecture is and will be, versus a ground-up approach that suspends judgment and allows the collective the space and energy for definition.

While the forum showed the depth and breadth of the practitioners in accumulating possibilities in technology and issues to create new architectures, it also reflected a larger sea change in values for the clients and communities that demand a new way of approaching what and how something is built, against a more recent past of architectural over-statement.

For this year’s organizing Chairman, Seah Chee Huang, “ArchiFest is conceived to provide that avenue for these imminent tensions in an open and discursive manner, so as to develop creative and purposeful propositions and solutions. The event can also be used as an effective barometer to assess our society’s level of appreciation of these issues at large.”

As the year draws to a close, Singapore experiences a rash of design events during the Singapore Design Festival from the ISCID World Design Congress to an inaugural Design Thinking Symposium. Given that SIA are in the midst of planning the first Singapore Architectural Biennale, slated for 2010, it will be exciting to see what ensues from the present flux of forward moves. As it is, things are definitely in an interesting transition.

www.archifest.sg

1/2/ Archifest Forum
3/ The Yuhu Elementary School
4/ TEN Bangkok

5/ Armani Fifth Avenue
6/ Hypergreen
7/ Theatre Agora



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