

Preface

Decades of committed interest in Asian urbanism and its rapidly changing conditions have made me increasingly conscious of the strong local peculiarities and chaotic, irrational spatial responses within Asian cities, as well as the irrelevance of modernist planning theories and practices. Over the years, I have critically analysed and discussed these issues in numerous essays and lectures. Since the early 1990s, I have become acutely aware of the vital necessity in broadening my theoretical knowledge and understanding of the growing complexities of contemporary multi-disciplinary discussions in order to actively participate in and make effective contributions towards the discourse of Asian urbanism today.

Exposure to the writings of numerous cultural studies theorists has reinforced my conviction that the dynamics of Asian (post)modernity and urbanism must be analysed within a framework that bridges various disciplines and must be firmly grounded in both local contextuality and postmodern pluralistic contemporiness. In the process, I have identified three crucial inter-related issues. First, with the impending demise of modernist planning, the footprints and corpses of failed modernist visions are littered everywhere. Second, millions of urban poor in the emerging economies of Asia suffer the brunt of urbicide and redevelopment and rightly deserve a more equitable share of development benefits. Third, the present vacuum of implementable radical urban theories has occurred at the time when unprecedented expansion and restructuring of cities in rapidly developing economies are taking place.

It is within this challenging context that I have attempted to conceptualise a radical theory of Asian ethical urbanism, which transcends and discards the constraints and rigidity of modernist planning and situates its critical substances within the unprecedented and explosive conditions of Asian cities today. Special attention was given to the peculiarities and dynamism of present Asian urban and architectural

conditions in order to contest and mitigate socio-ecological forms and political influences generated by the current neo-liberal global capitalism. Unlike many leading urban theorists who are not architects, my conceptual starting point must inevitably be spatial, three-dimensional and urban-oriented. It cannot be otherwise.

Part I of this book consists of the main essay in three sections. First, “Orientation” establishes three issues—Multiple Modernities, Ethics and Happiness and Radical Glocality—as baselines for an effective formation of Asian ethical urbanism, by clarifying ideas that have previously been unquestioningly bound up with Western values and discourses. Second, “Asian Ethical Urbanism” identifies, analyses and defines the essentiality of various ethical elements and discusses their effective integration into rapidly expanding Asian cities. In this exploratory synthesis, I have identified five topics: Conservation and Memories, Safeguarding the Commons, Spaces of Indeterminacy, Land and Spatial Justice. Many other issues such as basic rights, ecological sustainability, housing and shelter, transport and mobility, as well as those issues relevant only to specific localities, await further analysis. The final section examines the postmodern phenomenon of *post-planning*, a semi-anarchistic, flexible, chaotic and open-minded system which can become an effective instrument for Asia ethical urbanism.

Part II of this book consists of three city studies on Hanoi, Shanghai and Singapore, which were completed in the last two years, and which attempted to match my theoretical formulation with actual conditions occurring in the cities of Asia. The Hanoi essay is an urgent plea for the preservation of the environment and socio-cultural integrity of the Ancient Quarter. The preliminary observation of Shanghai attempts to capture the pain and excitement of the city’s dramatic transformations in recent years. The new urban cultures and lifestyles, while unreservedly engaging with the global, are deeply imbued with a unique Chineseness. Professor Leon van Schaik commented that the Singapore essay “progressively removes the Orientalist *other* from the observational processes of these writers, so predominantly from the West, who flirt with the exotic in Asian cities and display them in zoo-like conditions to their

compatriots.” Also included is “Asian Architecture in the New Millennium”, a critical examination of Western oriented contemporary architectural theories and discourses, as well as an attempt to engage with contemporary Asian architecture on its own terms, while taking a postmodern perspective.