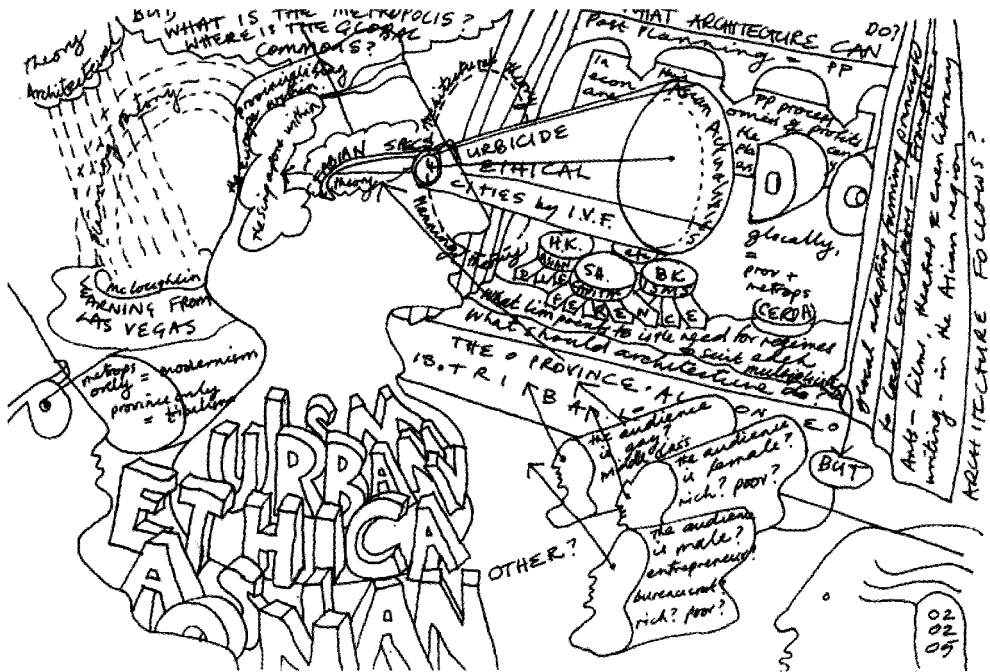


Introduction



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William Lim is “a practising architect and a critical urbanist.” This statement of his professional identity sits immediately adjacent to the topic “Spatial Justice” in Part I of this book (p 27). For me it frames the question that this remarkable argument poses: “The key question now is what should be done.” (p 31) Lim’s argument is situated in the discourse of post-modern Planning and Economics. He pointedly cites Castells, Harvey, Soja, Sandercock, etc. There are no architectural texts here at all. Looking into this through the lens of a slightly modified, more architectural enquiry, I

ask what Lim's argument means for what architecture can or should do. I am emboldened in this by some curious precedents. Urban planning as a practice—is it a discipline? I doubt it—grew out of architecture, as does William Lim's enquiry. It is no longer, as Lim observes, part of the architectural discourse, and this alone is a challenge that Lim throws at the feet of his colleagues. But it was. I assume that I do not need here to mark a trail through this relatively short history, but I will return to delineate some schools of thought that have created the practices that architects employ when they act as designers on an urban scale. What I want to reflect on here is another cry from the heart from an architect who observed, as Lim observes, that what is happening in cities is not what planners or designers want to happen, that it does not conform to their theories, and yet it is in some senses good. Certainly in some sense better than what plans and designs project on cities as desirable visions. I refer of course to Denise Scott Brown's initiative *Learning from Las Vegas*¹. Here was an architect who, like Lim, studied planning at the Architectural Association, and who—in moving to the USA—confronted a chasm between reality and theory. And here was an architect who together with Robert Venturi posed the question: what does it mean for architecture if we work from actuality towards theory rather than the other way around? Their architectural practice has been a concerted experiment in finding out. So has been Lim's. More about this later, too.

Something has happened to make a re-stating of this enquiry an urgent matter. There has been a sea change in the ways in which we observe the world, one that imposes another layer of observing above the instrumental, projective gaze of modernism². We architects are slowly discovering what this means about how we must look at actuality. What intrigues Lim about the emerging Asian multiplicity is the way in which it defies the modernist certainties that underlay planning theory in the modern past. In that past, Scott Brown brought a strongly modernist methodology to the study of Las Vegas: systematic, analytical and linear in its logic, but also projective in its intentions and outcomes. From the findings of this analysis, modes of acting flowed forcefully into a series of built works that sought to bring the spontaneously

occurring forms of an “organic” urban growth obeying Lim’s characterisation of post-planning: “in this post-planning process, economies and profits are the central players” (p 28) into a modern urban architecture. The results were, as we shall see, paradoxical³. What happens in the new, more reflective frame of the observers who observe themselves in the act of observing? Recently Ignasi de Sola Morales⁴ identified the phenomenon that has made this derivation of practice from observation so difficult for architects. He (along with Andrea Kahn⁵ and Nikos Papastergiadis⁶— all working independently) discovered a widespread adoption of and affection for the abandoned and the undesigned spaces in cities by inhabitants who spurned the consciously designed spaces. How, he wondered, could anyone “design” for a city when the very act of designing (within whatever paradigm was brought to the task by the designer) produced alienating space, and appealing space was created by obsolescence or war, and consequent dereliction and abandonment by regulating powers?

Now all of this that happened in the “West”. So, if some Westerners have encountered this problem already, is Lim a little late in singling out for critique those who look at the Asian city and “see” only dysfunction? No, not at all. Firstly this critique is not addressed at Westerners who—if they are alert—are already grappling with these issues thanks to the theorists mentioned above. The critique is addressed to the modernist within. Within every controlling bureaucrat, every entrepreneur with a vision of the city-fragment-beautiful, every engineer engaged in a vast city-by-IVF design for another of the farmlands from which “70 million Chinese farmers” have been ejected in that past decade. The critique is aimed at the modernist within every architect who comes, by one means or another—and more of this later too—to make their contribution to their city. This could be another modernist reform, in which the criticism runs essentially as follows: “your methods are faulty because your observations are inadequate.” More rigorous observation of the city will reveal to you its multiplicities and the ways in which they are best encouraged and conserved, its own pathways to happiness, its (hidden) commons, its (hidden) spatial injustices—and these heightened awarenesses will lead you to a more “glocal” response. Such a conclusion, while it

would be a good thing, would be to miss the full import of Lim's argument. The method that Lim advocates looks in two directions at once. As much as it sharpens focus on what is actually out there—the actuality of city growth—it drives inwards to the modernist within the observers themselves. Like Dipesh Chakrabati⁷ in his book *Provincialising Europe*, who argues that the formerly colonised need to locate and provincialise the Europe within them, the issue for Lim is not to change the “West”, but to confront the “West” within us.

Perhaps I can best explore what I think this means through a brief history of some highlights of Lim's own practice as an architect⁸. This career has two distinct phases. In the early post-colonial period in Singapore, Lim was one of those who were “given”—or “gained”—the opportunity to build the future of the city as they conceived it. This resulted in the mega-structure of Golden Mile, a signally “modern” superposition of functions in space. This was the most charismatic of a series of such urban pieces, delivering in a great measure the integration of services, transport and accommodation that was the keynote of modern visions of the city. What did the city learn from these remarkable structures? Today Lim can argue that the success of this approach taught the City State all the wrong lessons. It spelled out that integration needs a controlled environment. *It internalised in the mind of the City State a profound first order modernity, based on linear logics and command structures.* Singapore has become internally “modern”. Meanwhile, elsewhere, in Thailand—never colonised, and in China—only peripherally challenged by colonisation, another form of development has emerged to the consternation of the modern observers, be they from the West, or self-Westernised. In the second phase of his architectural career, Lim rejects the co-option into the command economy, and chooses to act chiefly in its free-market periphery. And in this—as an architect—he adopts the approach of an individually recognisable, postmodern signature that defies the rational conformity of the City State approach. This opens him to a criticism that he, as an architect, has become peripheral to the development process. And this is certainly the case if you look at the bulk of what has been built in Singapore. What Lim is now labouring to do, as I see it,

is to describe how his belief in the individual creativity of an architect aligns with the fundamental development processes of the new Asian city, processes that defy control and anonymity. Processes that require the observers to observe themselves observing, and find through that the locus in which to glean the opportunity to assist⁹.

I will return to the possible efficacy of this position. First I want to address a response to his argument that seems obvious: why not simply better observe, and better respond? Earlier I mentioned the history of planning. There is no position that has not been prefigured in our 7,000 year history as city makers. Perhaps the most profound of all of the modernist plans devised for the expansion of a city was that of Cerda for Barcelona¹⁰. Where did this begin? Why, with a very close observation of the conditions in the existing city. An observation that drove to spatial justice, to conservation, to safeguarding the commons, even to a conscious strategy of indeterminacy. Here they discovered through the statistics of mortality that those who lived higher up in buildings, closer to the sun and the breeze and further way from the open sewers that were the streets, lived longer. Here Cerda and his investigators observed a need for pre-schools, pocket parks, neighbourhood markets—the full instrumentality of the hygienic city with equal access to services and environmental goods for all. And Cerda even predicted on the basis of what he observed that—all things being equal—everyone would want to own their own “horse-less carriage”. All of this derived in a logical and linear way from the observations. But, and here is the key to what Lim is arguing, it was not implemented for decades because this elegant design lacked a political design. Parliament debated the plan early, and adopted it early. But sub-committee after sub-committee stalled its implementation for two generations of the average life span of citizens. Until Cerda devised a way of allocating development rights in the new grid proportional to pre-existing holdings of land in the farm land that lay beneath his beautiful, chamfered-corner grid.

If post-planning is a way to spatial justice, then there has to be in Lim's argument a way in which "economies and profits [as] central players" drive to those ends. Where we sit relative to Lim's intuitions about where the main action is for architects depends on something that influences that hidden hand in a way that it is not currently being influenced. And here, like Cerda, we enter a period of debate—and as Ginsberg of the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) pointed out¹¹, it has been ever thus. Can there be a taxation regime—like carbon trading (as is hoped)—that operates in the environment, as a benign market force addressing multiplicity, spatial justice, the need for commons, and makes us all happier because even in our greed we benefit the greater good? That is where the architect in me is taken by Lim's argument, an argument that is all in favour of diversity in demand and supply of architectural services. Can boutique practice, like the "arts—films, theatres and even literary writing" improve without such a regime? And if there were such a regime, how would it serve "multiplicity" rather than drive to a wave of globally normative practice?

Here I will speculate a little about the regimes that Lim identifies that might serve such an end, and suggest how they could support local communities of innovation, neither merely modern and metropolitan, nor merely tribal or provincial. To return to the Scott Brown Venturi exemplar, let us consider what was learned from their experiment. It would be fair to suggest that here, as in the case of Lim's early career, the lessons others learned were the wrong ones. This is not for a moment to impugn any of the architectural achievements of Scott Brown Venturi; I can and will argue the case for any and all of them as important and enjoyable works. But in addressing Las Vegas as a potentially universal condition, the *Learning from Las Vegas* proposition sowed the seeds of the decay of the proposition that we should so learn. As Las Vegas has subsequently shown, it had more to teach than was observed at the time of the book that documented that pioneering research. What went wrong? If I extrapolate from Lim's argument, there was a modernist inside the minds of the researchers that led them to assume that what they observed was in some way universally applicable. And indeed Venturi did lecture about a very baldly modern binary opposition between

the “duck” (a stall in the shape of a duck, the whole building acting as sign)—BAD, and a decorated shed (a stall with a false front carrying the signage)—GOOD¹². As Lim insists as he surveys Bangkok, Hong Kong and Shanghai, each city—indeed each part of each of these cities—has developed its own process of development. It is a consequence of his argument in its totality that each part probably has its own definition of its commons, its conservation mode, its own, often unexpected, means of creating spatial justice. And while the background engine may be the opposite of a command economy, Lim’s approval of the notion of “Asian capitalisms” —note the plural—is crucial to his vision of how architectures—note the plural—might play their role “vibrantly” in these cities, avoiding the “copies of the original, outdated aestheticism, sham localism and senseless facade treatment” (p 33) that he sees as characteristic of the tall buildings of the cities.

Returning to Lim’s observations about the vibrancy of arts in these cities, I am struck by the importance of the tension and the balance between the forces of the local and the aspirations to the global that characterise the best of what I observe. Singapore Theatre¹³ engages with Singlish in the full knowledge of what is happening in world theatre, and in this it becomes of interest to the world. And in using that language it can surface what is inherent in living in Singapore in ways that disarm control. Without the full awareness of the world beyond this could become a tribal mirror, narcissistic and destructive. Without an irony that comes from a lively investigation of the modernists within the directors and performers, this could also become a merely World Music fashioning of a new and quaint ethnicity. The creators must deal with their local actuality while always seeking out the global commons that tests that actuality, ensures that it has not become a form of special pleading, of excusing bad practice on the grounds of difference.

Is there a parallel for architecture? At one level of observation, “post-planning” is the universal condition. In so many places we struggle to rectify what has been done, often for the best of all possible reasons. Multiplicity requires strong local cultures of architecture, and these are dependant on a multiplicity of procurement processes.

In Barcelona, once Cerda's plan was implemented, with its development rights rolled up into spatial envelopes rather than conforming to the boundaries of the pre-existing field system, no block in the grid was in the sole ownership of one person. A development process ensued that gave wide access to capital accumulation, based on a wide variety of parcel sizes. The architectural culture flourished because there was strong competition between owners, and blocks were constructed to the designs of several architects located side by side. In this hothouse of micro-opportunity there was extensive experimentation, and a distinctive local art deco evolved. This was the shell in which the renowned talent and religious mania of Gaudi¹⁴ was the grit, producing an innovative architecture even more distinctive and idiosyncratic.

These are the micro-conditions for entrepreneurial operations that need to be harnessed in each multiplicity, and in the megalopolises, in each segment of the city. It is no accident that Taipei (so well documented by Sand Helsel in *Taipei Operations*¹⁵) has a similarly differentiated urban fabric—its family enterprise dominated economy has created a similar competitive environment. But in both cities (Barcelona and Taipei) architectural culture has not had a sustained run of innovation. Those commissioning works of architecture have lapsed into the bad habit of choosing from existing international brands, rather than working to support more local innovation. It is evident to me that the state and the institutions of the state have a role to play in ensuring the sustainability of innovation in architecture. The most notable exemplar for this comes from Kumamoto prefecture in Japan¹⁶. Here the prefecture government has adopted a novel form of “post-planning”—an acupuncture approach. In this approach all pretence at a modernist systems approach to improvement across the board has been abandoned in favour of identifying small projects that could make a difference to the economic and social well-being of districts all over the prefecture, which has a population of three million centred on a city of a million inhabitants. Early works shored up the ancient heritage of the state—a commons of bridges and viaducts. Subsequent projects include public toilets at tourist bus destinations, observatories in scenic places, fire stations, museums that make a local tradition of parading into a perennial display for

visitors, a puppet theatre and school that has saved the economy of a remote village by transforming an annual puppet show into a perennial activity for many inhabitants. The design also pioneered new ways of using timber in constructing large-span, earthquake resistant buildings, so promoting the local timber industry. Thanks to the enlightened leadership of the first appointed commissioner, Isozaki, these small works have been given to young architects at the outset of their careers. Some of the most notable of the current generation of internationally acclaimed Japanese architects have begun their careers with works in the Artpolis; Toyo Ito, now commissioner, and Kazuo Sejima amongst them.

This it seem to me meets all of the requirements that Lim sets out in his argument: here is a locally created process without precedent in the West, seemingly defying the universalising aims of modernist planning, and yet satisfying in some measure the needs of spatial justice, supporting and sustaining the commons, and aiding the development of an innovative architectural culture specific to the region and the country. Architecture itself is only worthwhile when it is so locally engaged, and within a hotly competitive situation which supports a multiplicity of practices in such a way that they are able to establish a research, and pursue it, within the compass of like minded peers and worthy adversaries. Globalisation in the mind focuses architects as much as planners and developers on a dismal me-too imitation of what happens in the universal metropolis that we professionals construct in our minds. Lim is right to insist that architects journey into the discourse of planning in order to emerge with good questions about how to conduct themselves in the *gaining and effecting of commissions* such that every multiplicity is graced with its own architectural culture. But the Artpolis experiment is only a straw in the wind. As I observed earlier, it plays out in a region that is not confronting the explosive growth that concerns Lim. *Asian Ethical Urbanism* sets out the challenge to all involved in the improvement of city life in times of explosive growth. And that, as Lim argues requires innovation from us all, policy setters,

developers and designers. *Asian Ethical Urbanism* gathers together the principles that such innovation needs to address if we are to be happy in these cities, remembering with Lim that Kant laid down the first of these principles: namely that one may not ask for yourself something that you would deny to others.