

Review: *Non West Modernist Past: On Architecture and Modernities*

Edited by William S.W. Lim and Jiat-Hwee Chang

Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2012.

(for publication in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*)

Although research on architectural modernism outside the “West” has been rapidly expanding in the past two decades, *Non West Modernist Past* is the first book that offers a critical overview and assessment of this emerging scholarship. This edited volume is the product of a conference organized by the Architectural Association Asia and the Singapore Institute of Architects in early 2011. With contributions by leading scholars from the fields of architecture, sociology, art history and cultural studies, it raises many potent questions not only about the writing of architectural historiographies and construction of the canon, but also more generally about the relationship between architectural modernism and modernity as well as their varied entanglements with colonialism, nationalism and globalization.

The title of the book provocatively conjoins three geographical and historical terms: “Non West,” which refers to all territories outside Europe and North America; “Modernist,” which refers to a general attitude oriented towards the future predicated on continuous human progress; and “Past,” which distinguishes modernist architecture of the earlier periods from that of the present. While as a concept “Non Western Modernist Past” may invite contested interpretations, it is precisely the editors’ aim to use the title to foreground an existing condition in the architectural history discipline. It is argued here that modernism outside the “West” has long been “doubly marginalized” by architectural historians and scholars in area studies. The coupling of “Non West” and “Modernist” then, is an adroit heuristic move to invite projections of an “alternative disciplinary reality” in which the heterogeneous nature of modernism and its uneven career in “Non Western” contexts are emphasized.

The book is organized into three parts. The first, “Interrogating Modernism and Modernities,” includes five theoretical essays by Anthony King, Mark Crinson, Leon van Schaik, Duanfang Lu and Fernando Luiz Lara. Each author provides a critical reassessment of the use of key terms, categories and underlying concepts in the historiographies of modernism, including, for example, the ideas of internationalism, critical regionalism as well as the structural couplets of “center” and “peripheries,” metropolises and colonies, and “First” and “Third’ Worlds, etc. The second part,

“(Dis)locating Modernism in the World,” consists of eight case studies of “Non West” modernism that encompass India, Turkey, China, Singapore, Indonesia, Brazil and North Africa. The third part, “Reflecting/Refracting Modernism,” includes three commentary pieces by Randolph S. David, C.J. W.-L. Wee and Chua Beng Huat, who reflect on the key concerns in the previous chapters, particularly those centering on the ideas of multiplicity, heterogeneity and mobility in architectural modernism.

Like many edited volumes, the central challenge here is to unite a multitude of case studies across diverse geographies under a cogent conceptual frame that also avoids generalization. This balance is especially crucial given the book’s emphasis on the need to attend to historicity and specificity of local contexts while retaining the use of the meta-geographical categories of the “West” and “Non West” as its guiding praxis. The editors, William Lim and Jiat-hwee Chang, have done an excellent job in elucidating these inherent problematics in their introductory essay. Lim and Chang carefully decipher three approaches adopted by the contributors in their effort to challenge the conventional Euro-American centered architectural historiography. These include the expansion of the spatial and temporal frame for the study of modernism in both the “West” and the “Non West,” the examination of the socio-political conditions behind the production of architecture, and the attention to the role of agency, professional practice and other nuanced processes that shape the making of the built environment. Notwithstanding their different theoretical positions, the essays in the book collectively illustrate what Lim and Chang call “hetero-modernisms” – a term that describes “the diverse modernisms in complex relationships with the uneven process of modernization and varied modernities around the world beyond the West.”

Non West Modernist Past offers a number of innovative entry points to reconceptualize the histories of modernism. First, the juxtaposition of selective “Non West” modernist projects enables a diachronic investigation into how modernism has entered different geo-political spaces at particular historical junctures. In doing so, this arrangement highlights both modernism’s “universal” character, as well as its susceptibility to appropriation in particular ways. Second, the attention to the circulation of architectural ideas and the indigenous agents involved in modernist schemes provides a basis for remapping the production of knowledge that departs from the long established “diffusionist” model. Finally, by revealing certain contradictory ascriptions to modernism and modernity amongst some of the essays, the book also opens up questions about the intellectual positions of the contributors themselves. The most notable contradiction is

between a widely shared goal to unsettle the “universalizing” master narrative in Euro-American-centric historiographies against the polemic call to support “global values” for the advent of a more just society in the modern present. Within *Non West Modernist Past*, such “global values” allude to the promotion of democratic aspirations and the elimination of uneven development and the inequalities – all elements belonging to what King refers to as “social modernity” or “the global society in which we all live.”

These contradictory ascriptions to modernism and its associated “universal values” point back to the tricky conception of “Non West modernism” itself. And it seems to me that these contested ascriptions, many of which have in one way or another become synonymous with the “West,” could have been deciphered more carefully in some of the chapters. As Crinson has noted, modernism is itself full of paradoxes and cannot be easily subsumed under the “derogative impulses of nation-states or of capitalism.” When it first emerged in architecture in the early 20th century, modernism operated as a form of critical discourse and was endowed with an ethical aspiration oriented towards social betterment. These multiple associations have not been lost in recent writings on the subject. Hilde Heynen, for example, has pointed out that the historical reality and complexity of modernism can only be grasped by examining the cultural, political and social dimensions that together constitute the foundation of the Modern Movement. What is potentially problematic with the conception of “Non West modernism” is the tendency to fixate the meanings of the “Modern” and its association with a generic “West” in order to qualify its Other, thus reducing much of modernism’s own contradictions into a dominant, hegemonic “Western ideology.” Given the rich material of the contributions, it might have been interesting to explicitly frame the varied conceptions of the “West” as a key point of discussion within the volume.

On the whole, most chapters have avoided this kind of generalization and instead allow the case studies to speak to the adaptability of modernism as discourse and practice. Notable examples include Abidin Kusno’s excellent study of the contested ideals associated with different phases of modernization in postcolonial Indonesia, and Zeynep Mennon’s insightful analysis of the Turkish state’s attempt to promote modernist architecture to advance a particular political agenda. Indeed, examining the competing values of the “modern” and reflecting on what scholars have chosen to critique, embrace, and omit also brings up the question of ethics and the purpose of critique itself. As Chua has contended in his commentary piece, while it is important to recognize multiplicity and pluralism, tolerance of “difference” can also become a ploy for not addressing concrete

injustice and inequalities. This is also to suggest that without an appeal to some common interests and commitments, or “universal values,” so to speak, any intellectual dialogue about “difference” can only go so far.

Lim and Chang’s notion of “hetero-modernism” is certainly an intriguing frame for rethinking the histories of modernism. However, the editors could have engaged more directly with the question of what this reevaluation can actually do. For example, in what possible directions can a “more socially and politically situated understanding of modernism” advance the debate and inform current practice? As Lim himself has expressed in the polemical prologue of the book, the reexamination of “Non West modernism” should lead to the building of a more “humane, just and ecologically sustainable modernity.” And yet, there remains much work to be done to link the critical historical perspectives raised by this volume and the ongoing processes of advancing a desired “social modernity” in the present.

While these are not easy questions to answer, *Non West Modernist Past* is without a doubt a major contribution to the field and represents a significant milestone in advancing scholarship in the study of architectural modernism. I applaud the efforts of the editors and recommend it not only for those interested in the histories of the built environment, but all who are concerned with the ongoing construction of knowledge that traverses across geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

Cecilia Chu

University of California, Berkeley