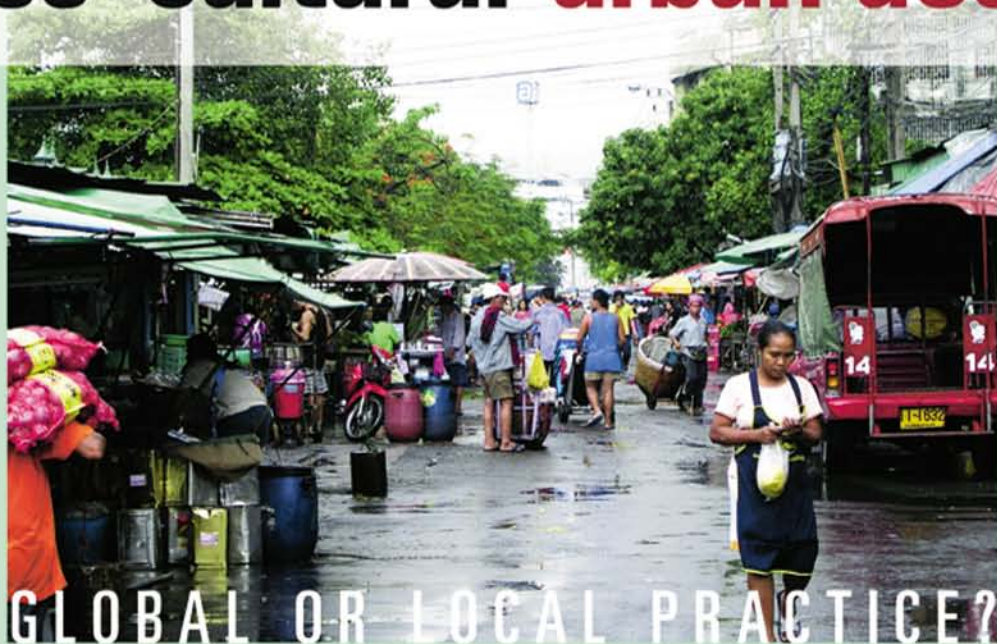




# cross-cultural urban design



GLOBAL OR LOCAL PRACTICE?

EDITED BY CATHERIN BULL DAVISI BOONTHARM CLAIRE PARIN DARKO RADOVIĆ GUY TAPIE

# Cross-Cultural Urban Design

Unprecedented in its scope, *Cross-Cultural Urban Design: Global or Local Practice?* explores how urban design has responded to recent trends towards global standardization. Following analysis of practice in many places, at many scales and among many disciplines in the local domain, the book looks at how urban design and planning should be repositioned for the future.

*Cross-Cultural Urban Design* introduces and discusses the issues that now confront the planning and design of cities and settlements and create the context for cross-cultural urban design practice everywhere, including:

- population movement
- international communication
- urbanization and suburbanization
- tourism
- commercialization
- environmental degradation
- sustainability
- flows of capital.

It maps out how urban practitioners, researchers and educators are currently responding to these issues in their work, presenting and discussing cases and theories of urbanism from across the globe.

Contributions are framed in three sections. **Reconceptualizing the city** presents ways to read the contemporary city and rethink work within it. **Experiments in practice** presents and discusses cases where practitioners have confronted new conditions as experiments observed and queried. Finally, **Learning cross-cultural urban practice** presents and discusses the learning process as a field of research and its contribution to practice.

The concluding chapter offers new theoretical frameworks for understanding current practice and ways of developing the capacity to deal with urban environments globally.

A unique collection that will be of use to all those engaged in contemporary urban design research and practice, *Cross-Cultural Urban Design* presents a new way of thinking about urban design within the complex context of the contemporary world and posits a way forward – as cross-cultural practice that supports and develops sustainability – locally.

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Global or local practice?

Edited by Catherin Bull,  
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# Foreword

## Confronting epistemes<sup>1</sup>

Although cross-national commerce, professional practice and education have been permanent features of human history, they have taken decidedly different forms in the present, so-called post-colonial age. In the sphere of education, for example, as a strategy of empire, colonialism brought the idea of obligation to educate the subject peoples. Decolonization freed the colonizers of that burden, and today educational 'assistance' takes a new, paternalistic form either implicitly or explicitly, as 'foreign aid'. Commerce and professional practice similarly mutate.

The investors and the consultants can continue their exploitations as if colonization never ended. Indeed for them it never did, though they must pretend otherwise, but the educators profess 'ethics', and are more circumspect in their exploitations. The noble goals of foreign assistance, however, mask darker agendas of academe – variously as by-products of the intellectual enterprise of studying 'strange and exotic peoples' (so we study the indigenes as we educate them), or strategically as part of a new form of colonization (we help in order to draw their students into our own spheres), or to foster a new sense of dependence (so that they will subsequently employ us to solve their 'problems' which, in the main, we have helped create). We work intentionally to secure our own advancement, whether economically or in terms of intellectual capital.

Two variants of this essentially exploitative enterprise pose questions here: what is the effect when the neo-colonizing desire is from more than one metropolitan culture (say, on contemporary Vietnam and its hybrid infiltrations – France, Russia, then most recently the anglophone world)? And what of the neo-colonizing infiltrations when they are outside the ostensible colonial sphere (infiltrating Thailand rather than India or Malaysia or Indonesia)?

This Foreword is mainly a reflection on Thailand having to negotiate an identity when under both the francophone and the anglophone thrall. However, it could equally be, with modifications, about Indonesia under the Dutch recall and the Australian intrusion, or about present multi-assailed Vietnam, or Morocco simultaneously receiving French and Spanish 'assistance' and pan-Arab infil-

trations. Similarly, though the main focus here is on the educational sphere, the argument is equally applicable to international consultancy, or business 'co-operation' or humanitarian aid. Informing the following explorations is the suspicion that different world experiences will underlie different ways of viewing reality. The idea of enquiry that is manifested in all education and scholarship – and inevitably informs the worldviews of planners, architects, economists and investors – stands upon an epistemology: that is, on an understanding of what constitutes a question, what constitutes an answer and what constitutes a method for getting from one to the other. There may be fundamentally different epistemologies weaving through a Thai logic, a French logic, and an English or Australian logic.

### **The question of logics**

While Mikhail Bakhtin was not French but Russian, he stands as a seminal figure in the emergence of that tradition of critical thinking that is commonly labelled 'French post-structuralism'. For Bakhtin (1981), dialogicality informs every utterance and every text, including the 'text' of urban space. Thus arises 'dialogue', the interaction of the 'double logics' of speaker and listener (Clark and Holquist 1984; King 1996).

Much of the material in the contributions to this volume derives from a three-year collaboration between three schools of design, respectively in Bangkok, Melbourne and Bordeaux.<sup>2</sup> The distinguishing characteristic of the enterprise is that three logics intersect, and the idea of 'trialogue' might be coined for it. To the positivist-materialist, instrumentalist logic of British (and by descent Australian) traditions, and the speculative logic of the French – both in part formed and transformed in the colonizing experience – there is then added an episteme from an entirely different worldview, in part Buddhist and syncretist, problematizing (Western) principles of non-contradiction, and constantly questioning a materialist reality. That, however, is only part of the story, as the gaze of the following authors is from a far more diverse range of worldviews than merely those three, and so the trialogues will variously confront Arab, Chinese, Malay and other worldviews and their constituent logics.

This assertion of epistemological differences is, of course, speculation (and worse, it runs the risk of essentializing!). It is, however, a field for empirical investigation. Hence the current volume. What follows is essentially a series of accounts of cross-cultural confrontations on the question of what constitutes a 'better' urban space. Different worldviews would inevitably ensure that 'better' will be contested – my sense of 'better' may not be yours! Differences in worldview will also underlie colliding ideas about the morality of means for getting to that elusive 'better'

urban space. The fundamental assertion of this book is that these clashes of ideas, ideals, epistemes and logics, if brought into discourse and thereby reflected upon, can bring about the questioning of one's own values, assumptions and logic.

Marina Warner (2002) has written of the underlying energies and processes whereby one representation or idea generates another. The argument is that, on the evidence of history, the transformations that mark great creativity and the leaps to new modes of thought and life are most likely to occur in the collisions between cultures, in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilizations. Thus we get metamorphosis or life as change. So the highest aim in bringing together the multiple, disparate confrontations and frictions of the following chapters is to display just these sorts of collisions of cultures and the consequent possibilities of metamorphosis – towards a better urban space.

If there are these differences in logic that distinguish 'cultures' – differences in epistemes or 'systems of thought' as Foucault would term them – we surely have to seek them, at least in part, in their genealogy.<sup>3</sup> And it is to that we turn.

### **The question of epistemes and their genealogy**

In a typically provocative stab at the origins of that vast intellectual enterprise that constituted European Orientalism, post-colonial theorist Edward Said contrasted the eighteenth-century French and English gazes towards 'the Orient':

Consider ... the differences between an English speaker and a French speaker. For the former the Orient was India of course, an actual British possession; to pass through the Near Orient was therefore to pass en route to a major colony. Already, then, the room available for imaginative play was limited by the realities of administration, territorial legality, and executive power.... In contrast the French pilgrim was imbued with a sense of acute loss in the Orient. He came there to a place where France, unlike Britain, had no sovereign presence. The Mediterranean echoed to the sounds of French defeats, from the Crusades to Napoleon.

(Said 1979: 169)

So, argues Said, the Orient was defined for the British by a material imagination that, in turn, underlay the rise of British philosophical empiricism. For the French there could only be an imagination rooted in memories, speculations – 'suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences, and an almost virtuosic style of being' (Said 1979: 170). The links here were to an altogether more speculative, introspective (French) literature. While British triumphalist

empiricism may have now run its constricting course, the flights of Renan, Baudelaire and Flaubert can be seen to have foreshadowed – even given birth to – the brilliance of twentieth-century French thought from Bachelard to existentialism to post-structuralism.

Australians might like to think of themselves as open to French speculative thought – Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida – but their intellectual traditions have for a century and a half been set by British professors of philosophy, history and literature. The gaze from Melbourne to Bangkok is cast in an instrumentalist, empiricist materialism. From Bordeaux it is more likely to be through the prism of post-structuralism and deconstructionist thought.

The attention to the East fails to be reciprocated; the East did not similarly engage the West, and present language fails to address the view obtained of France or Australia through the lens of Bangkok.

### **The question of a Thai episteme**

Whatever else the above suggests, it would definitively assert that there is no privileged viewpoint from which the West is to observe the genealogy of a Siamese 'system of thought'.<sup>4</sup> What follows may be a somewhat eclectic, even hybridized account, but it is still overwhelmingly from that instrumentalist-materialist Anglo perspective. A French post-structuralist account would be different.

In a recent set of papers, Peter Jackson (2004a, 2004b) has traced the evolution of Siamese forms of power from what he terms a pre-modern 'theatre state' – a culture of 'face' and 'reputation', preoccupied with appearances and surface ritual – to the nineteenth-century evolution of the 'performative state'.

Non-colonized Siam did not need to wage a war of independence to expel foreign colonizers. Nevertheless, to preserve national autonomy a new form of local power was called into being, and the regime of images emerges from this strategic mobilization of local power in the service of preserving Siamese independence.

(Jackson 2004b: 219)

The need to create this 'regime of images' of a 'civilized' Siam – to delegitimize any external colonizing intent, typically from the British and the French – nevertheless stood in some disjuncture with the private sphere: 'A defining feature of the Thai regime of images is a rigid demarcation between what is publicly unspeakable, especially in the presence of a non-Thai audience, and what is "common knowledge" in private, local discourses' (Jackson 2004b: 220).

Jackson traces this disjuncture back to a pre-modern northern Thai episteme characterized by intolerance to ambiguity in surface ritual, but a structural ambiguity of local myths (Jackson 2004a:

188). The myths obliterate and fuse logical categories that are carefully built up in the rites: rites are cognitively disjunctive, myths are conjunctive.<sup>5</sup> He further cites a diverse literature that recognizes the extension of this determinative power of the 'surface' over the 'essence' into a present Siamese system of thought, identifying what is effectively a reversal of the order of Western epistemologies. For example there is Rosalind Morris's description of this 'many-sided phenomenon' as the Thai 'order of appearances', 'the love of the disciplined surface' and 'an overinvestment in appearances' (Morris 2000).

While Morris's work has a regional focus, there are two further points of wider significance to be drawn from it. One is her observation on the function of appearances (signs, masks) in the (Protestant/capitalist) West, vis-à-vis Thailand: whereas the former has demanded 'a relationship of transparency between inner truth and outward appearances, between value and its sign, ... the cultural logics that were historically dominant in Thailand permitted appearances and truths to be radically disjunct', (Morris 2002: 53). Nothing could be further from the unmasking, 'deconstructive' pre-occupations of the French critical tradition than this, nor more distant (though differently so) from positivist-empiricist Anglo traditions. The second point is that although this radically different epistemology may have had its origin in the folk realm, its present manifestation is neither pre-modern, nor contradictory and unstable, nor simply transitional to some Western idea of modernity, but modern – albeit alternatively modern.

Nor, however, is this or any other mode of thought unchanging: there is now a rapidly expanding, non-official Thai bourgeoisie (Anderson 1998: 182–184), and increasing questioning of the surface of King, Nation and Religion,<sup>6</sup> and since the 1997 financial crisis, even aspects of private (family) venality have begun to be publicly questioned. Although the surface starts to fracture, the private sphere of the social production of space remains private – beneath the surface – and there is effectively no architectural or urban design discourse.

### **The question of the global and the local**

A characteristic of the present time is that worldviews must come to terms with the increasing exaggeration of both the global and the local. Frederic Jameson (1991) has written of 'the post-modern hyperspace', that stretching of space and time to accommodate the multinational space of late capitalism. It is a space of vastly accelerated flows – of capital, information, people, ideas and desires. The hyperspace comprises international networks of capital, communications (the Internet, the cellular phone, CNN, BBC World) and travel, undifferentiated airports, hotels, office parks, shopping malls and their franchised outlets for globalist products, billboards and logos.

The hyperspace enables cities to compete for what Saskia Sassen (1999) calls the 'new users' of the city: the footloose, international tourists, business travellers, entrepreneurs, innovators and investors who can take their consumption, interests, creativity or investments wherever they choose. The transnational practitioners and transnational academics represented in this volume – and hopefully in its readership – are among these new users. However, the mobility of the new users requires each city to differentiate itself from the rest. For Bangkok to compete with Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, etc, it must distinguish itself from those rival cities by emphasizing its difference from them. So there is a turn to heritage, or tradition – the power of the local. This is then exaggerated, and thereby transformed. Thus we get hyper-traditions, the exaggeration of old practices and images and, when deemed necessary, even the invention of new 'traditions' (historically the British Raj style in India and Malaya, or present-day 'Bali style'). Hyper-traditions are a condition of possibility of the post-modern hyperspace.

In more quarantined, local design practice, hyper-tradition has tended to fall into caricature – in upturned 'Chinese' roofs on the bland glass boxes of Beijing, in Singapore's Disneyfied Chinatown, in stepped 'traditional' gabled roofs on shops or university campus blocks in Thailand, in Balinese split gates on all manner of buildings in Bali or, more anomalously, in Jakarta, etc. In transnational design practice as in transnational design education, in contrast, there is the perceived compulsion to 'find' the local, and to 'reinterpret' it. There are searches for 'the real', or perhaps 'authenticity'. Early examples of the playing out of this delusion might include Lutyens in New Delhi, Le Corbusier in Chandigarh or Kahn in Dacca. More recently, Denton Corker Marshall challenged Chinese classical traditions in Beijing; Skidmore Owings & Merrill have reinterpreted Chinese preoccupations with classical forms, traditions of numerology, the 1930s art deco of Shanghai and the rush to new technology; Malay forms have been transformed by Cesar Pelli, Kisho Kurokawa and others; and the list could go on. Certainly these are intrusions, and to be seen by many as arrogance and, worse, as intellectual neo-colonization. Yet they also enter the discourse on the dialectic of 'Identity and Difference' (Jameson 2005): these interpretations of the local will, at best, be hotly debated across the incommensurable epistemes and their languages. So if Malays object to the interpretations of their identity by a Pelli or a Kurokawa (or for that matter by Chinese-Malaysian Ken Yeang), then the obligation falls on them to provide their own, 'more truthful' representation of their traditions, beliefs and worldview. Thus the discourse is prised open.

The strength of the contributions to this volume is that it is not just the single alien intrusion that is encountered by the Thais or Moroccans or Montenegrins, but multiple bringers of assistance

(neo-colonizers). Also, in the main, what is being prised open is not mere architectural representation or interpretations of landscape, but the design of the spaces of everyday life – what we popularly term ‘urban design’.

Thailand presents a special problem in this context. There is no formal practice of urban design, while architectural and landscape design are, in the main, reserved for Thai designers, and effectively quarantined from that global discourse that can compel the reconsideration of the local. Nor is there any vigorous local discourse on the place of architecture and landscape in the definition and likely future trajectory of identity and the national urban space. The episteme of surfaces described above extends into behaviour, ethics and public morality. As Phillips (1965) argues, such a characteristic is embedded in people’s attitudes towards achieving ‘social success in life’ and in cultural values of ‘social cosmetics’, such as appearing ‘caring and considerate’ (the Thai concept of *kreng chai*), ‘politeness’, ‘kindness and helpfulness’ (Komin 1985: 179–180). More problematically, however, the culture also mandates ‘politeness’ in complimenting the actions of others – regardless of how crass, exploitative, oppressive or environmentally destructive they might be. Further, to criticize a fellow architect, landscape architect or investor is, by implication, to criticize the noble institution of ‘the family’, for we must always assume that the atrocities are committed with the higher good of the perpetrator’s family in focus. The discursive vigour that one encounters in China, Malaysia, Indonesia and many other societies is here dampened by ‘politeness’.

If the epistemic barriers can somehow be breached, we might reasonably expect a discourse on an architecture and landscape that can negotiate the links between a water-world and a terrestrial realm, return reflectively to the epistemic concern with being ‘caring and considerate’ and with politeness and kindness, and above all reflect upon that realm of surfaces and, in design, reveal them as surfaces – but now self-consciously and constructively (Noparatnaraporn and King 2007). The Thais deserve something decidedly better than what they currently get from their designers, investors and politicians.

### **The question of agendas**

Two, three or even more groups, each internally diverse, each arguably enmeshed in distinctive systems of thought (epistemes), typically intersect with each other over what each assumes to be a common interest: namely, what might constitute a better space of everyday life. So arises *trialogue* (to again bend the Bakhtinian understanding). In the wider context of this volume, it is even *multilogue*. To repeat, the discourse is prised open. There is more to it than that, however, and indeed we need to return to the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin. The term ‘utterance’ is invoked by Bakhtin, as ‘the

real unit of speech communication'; it is always 'situated' – it has a context away from which it cannot be understood. So context and contingency are inescapable. Utterance is also inexorably linked to 'voice', 'the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness' (Holquist and Emerson 1981: 434).

The voice modulates all communication, both written and spoken; it reflects the person's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention and worldview – their 'agenda' (Clark and Holquist 1984). This contingency cross-cuts any confrontation of epistemes either in dialogue or, with the possibility of far greater complexity (fragmentation of both modes of thought and intentions), in tria-logue/multilogue.

The complexity of communication magnifies further, in what Walter Benjamin identified as 'the task of the translator'. What cannot be said (represented) cannot be communicated; an epis-teme can only be reflected upon in a language, and no language bears a one-for-one correspondence with any other. What is intended in translation, Benjamin insisted, is not the simple trans-mission of information: 'any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad transla-tions' (Benjamin 1992: 70).

A translation, rather, is to strike that effect upon the new lan-guage 'which produces in it the echo of the original,' enriching the new. The translator stands outside 'the language forest ... aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own lan-guage, the reverberation of the work in the alien one', (Benjamin 1992: 77). So what is to reverberate? The original mode of representation is the answer – that is, the mode of intention rather than some intended object – the voice on which the motivating agenda is still detectable. But Benjamin's most extraordinary sug-gestion on the effect of translation is one of fundamental trans-formation – even metamorphosis in that sense intended by Marina Warner above:

For just as the tenor and the significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the cen-turies, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well.... Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

(Benjamin 1992: 74)

If the effect of translation is to see the birth of new language, and if modes of thought are interdependent with the languages in which thought is expressed, then the consequence of new language



must similarly be the metamorphosis of worldviews and epistemes themselves. We can go further than this however, for what are being translated across these incompatible languages are ideas of the most fundamental significance, to do with the spaces of everyday life itself – with better such spaces. A claim from Jacques Derrida echoes that above from Walter Benjamin:

Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.

(Derrida 1977: 185)

It is here that we find the great potential of the collisions of diverse histories, ways of knowing (epistemes), languages and linguistic traditions, agendas and different ideas of urban space and time. Our objectives are no less than to reinvent our own spaces of everyday life rather than to 'change' alien colleagues to our own too-often unchallenged positions – to understand the genealogy and the cultural contingency of our worlds, but also those 'absolutely illimitable' possibilities of metamorphosis that can burst forth from the reflexive collisions of epistemes and languages.

If metamorphosis is indeed to be sought in those fissures and interstices between cultures, epistemes and languages, as Marina Warner asserts, then one must turn – with some anticipation – to the sorts of collisions to which the following contributions will allude. A final warning, however: do not expect the explosions of creativity, new worlds and a better space of everyday life to be laid out neatly, clearly and there for the taking from these pages. Rather, the ideas, ideals and logic of the reader are also to enter into the equation, to be set against the conflicts and abrasions paraded in the arguments that follow and, in turn, against the reflections, contrasting viewpoints and further explorations contained in the introductions and conclusions from the book's authors.

Ross King

## Notes

- 1 The following in part derives from reflections and concerns expressed in a diversity of meetings by Pierre Culand, Pasinee Sunakorn and Ross King in planning a tri-part, tri-cultural programme of research and learning involving three schools of the built environment in Bangkok, Melbourne and Bordeaux (BMB). While the language of the reporting has determined that the reporter will be Ross King, all three are the proper authors of its ideas.
- 2 The Bangkok–Melbourne–Bordeaux (BMB) programme and the chapters directly and indirectly linked to it are described in the various introductory essays following.
- 3 As Foucault would insist! See for example Foucault (1977); and for com-

mentary, Gutting (2005: 43–53). It seems reasonable to assert that something of a Foucauldian genealogical intent runs through the present essay and indeed through the project it aims to preface, and traces of it are similarly to be sought in the chapters of the present volume.

- 4 For reasons that will become obvious from the following, there is an absence of a Thai tradition of such critical introspection. An outstanding exception is Winichakul (1994).
- 5 Here Jackson is citing the structuralist analyses of Richard Davis (1974).
- 6 While reverence for the present King remains undiminished, the institutions are increasingly scrutinized. For a review, see for example Reynolds (2006).

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