

SPACE





From Architect's Vision to 'Vertical Slum'

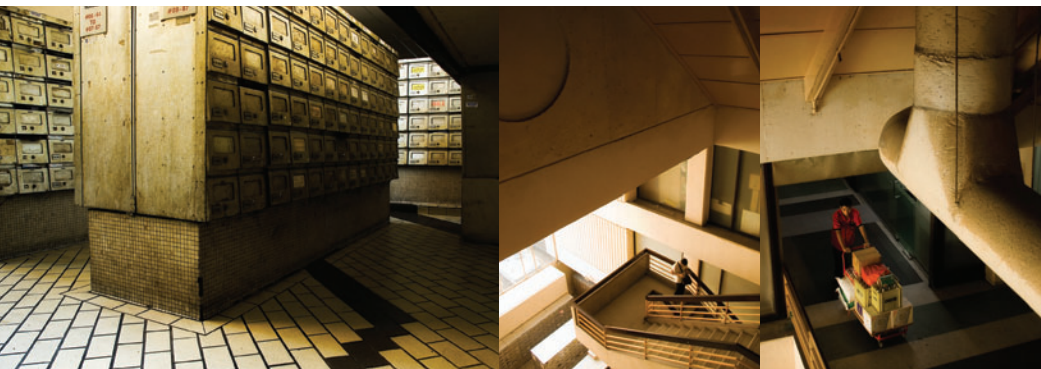
By Gladys Teoh. Photography by Philipp Aldrup

During a snowy Christmas in Tokyo, I chanced upon the world's first exhibition on the Metabolist Movement at the Mori Art Museum. Metabolism was one of the most important architectural, artistic and philosophical movements of the twentieth century and it redefined architecture as “how people use and interact with the space around them”. Using both utopian and humanist concepts of urban living, the Metabolists were, in part, a response to rapidly exploding population in Japan in the late twentieth century. City plans were based on “megastructures” that were expandable and mobile; they consisted of smaller, detachable sections within a larger, more permanent structure.

But with the exception of the iconic Nakagin Tower by Kisho Kurokawa, which surfaced as the first “interchangeable capsule” building in the world, Metabolist architecture hardly materialised at all in Japan. The movement morphed into companies concerned with mass housing and prefabricated steel and concrete systems. Outside Japan, however, its influence spread as far as Hawaii, the USA, Peru, and Macedonia.

In Singapore, the movement spawned a group of architects who produced wonderful collections of buildings in the 1970s such as the





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People’s Park Complex, the Golden Mile Complex, and Pearl Bank Apartments. These buildings were architectural trailblazers in their own right, but are faced with the threat of demolition. Some have already been bulldozed to make way for more profitable developments.

SHADOWS OF A GOLDEN AGE

The Golden Mile Complex was designed by William Lim, Gan Eng Oon and Tay Kheng Soon of Design Partnership (now known as DP Architects) and completed in 1973. Envisioned as a mixed development high-rise, the 16-storey building was one of the first in the region to integrate over 410 shops, 68 residential units and 226 offices into one building. The stepped-back terrace design enhanced natural ventilation and reduced noise from surrounding areas and the planning focus was on housing horizontal communities vertically. Once hailed as an exemplary Metabolist “megastructure”

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Over the years, fires and violent incidents have ruined the image of the Golden Mile. Younger generations, unappreciative of the architectural discourse of the building call it an “eyesore”. Nominated Member of Parliament Ivan Png called it a “vertical slum”, critical of the way some residents put up zinc sheets and patched boards over their balconies. Many locals have bemoaned the opening of Thai discos in the complex and others have opined that the toilets were among the dirtiest in the island state. Property owners of the Beach Road icon which now appears decrepit and rundown are eager for its demolition, having failed twice to get a collective agreement to sell the property which is sitting on prime real estate. The New Paper ran an article headlined “Man caught in gloryhole sex act” in June 2010, about a 30-year-old man who was caught engaging in a sex act with another man in a toilet cubicle on the second level of the complex.

RAISING THE ‘TABULA RASA’

Singapore has not one, but several of these iconic buildings. Yet these are largely unappreciated and are

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victims of material en-bloc sale attempts. These buildings were built according to ideals of pursuing dynamic growth, yet are now pressured to be taken down on the pretext of pursuing exactly that. Is this irony at its best or are we really inept at balancing history with economic progress? I was subsequently relieved to read that enough Singaporeans, when polled by the Straits Times, wished to see the conservation of Golden Mile Complex. However, is this enough to block fierce sale attempts of the site, given the way that property prices are at a sustained high in a land-scarce country? Are these select voices enough to compel the authorities to warrant a conservation status on the building?

After all, Singapore was propelled onto the stage of international architectural discourse with Rem Koolhaas's provocative essay "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis...or Thirty

Years of Tabula Rasa", published in 1995. The essay was a scathing critique of Singapore's brutal approach towards urban renewal, post-1965, in which entire "villages" had been ruthlessly eradicated in the name of economic survival, to be replaced by a soulless, manufactured skyline that was dominated by an endless landscape of identical concrete housing blocks. In its determination to rebuild the city in the shortest time possible from a sleepy backwater island into a world-class city, the nation was literally uprooted, and its residents herded into concrete boxed flat units.

COMPRESSION AND CONSUMERS

The dystopic reality of a "Potemkin metropolis" where the city appears elaborate and impressive but lacks real substance seems to hold true for Singapore, as it did many years ago. I spoke to Philipp Aldrup, a photographer based in Singapore,



Photos: www.philipp-aldrup.com or www.behance.net/uebersee

on his views. Philipp's work contemplates the co-existence of old and new, and explores how cityscapes change their meanings and functions as ways of life are altered by modern imperatives. "Singapore, in my opinion, is largely following a very different concept of growth – a growth of economics," he observes. "Less and less spaces are left undesigned or rather open for residents to alter, extend, and change. One is faced with completed developments that don't allow further experiments of use. One is reduced to being a consumer, be it for living, working, entertainment."

Some hold the perception that Singapore really is a metabolised city with multiple "city centres" in different neighbourhoods, and with

everything linked together by elevated train systems and highways. Megastructures such as shopping malls have different services in one building, from offices to retail and food to indoor sports venues. Aldrup disagreed: "I think that Singapore, at least for many of the new developments, doesn't really embody the ideals of metabolism. On the surface, of course every city flows like streams and currents. But if growth means aggressively erasing history on one side and creating new generic, non-local, non-culturally connected architecture on the other, then the city is slowly losing its function as a home for people. I think that's happening at the moment, not only in Singapore of course, but here it is so apparent and compressed."