



## PRESS RELEASE

### **Contested Modernities Postcolonial Architecture in Southeast Asia**

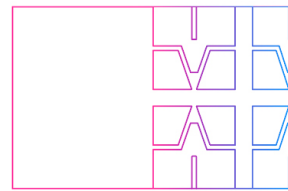
**Discourse programme, exhibition, ARCH+ magazine issue  
Starting on 16 April 2021**

Postcolonial architectural modernism in Southeast Asia is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion in light of rapid urbanization and ongoing processes of decolonization in the region. In Germany and Europe, however, this architecture and the debate surrounding it are barely known. *Contested Modernities* now brings this Southeast Asian discourse to Berlin with an exhibition, online events, and a publication, revealing surprisingly similar discussions that are currently being held about the architectural heritage of modernism.

*Contested Modernities* brings current positions on Southeast Asian modernism into an international dialogue and opens up new perspectives on the history, meaning, and future of modernism – in the region and beyond.

This project is part of the long-term programme *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism* and is based on a multi-year exchange between the Berlin curatorial team and scholars, architects, artists, and curators from the region. In 2019, intensive explorations of postcolonial architecture in each city were made possible by research, exhibitions, and events taking place in Phnom Penh, Jakarta, Yangon, and Singapore. The extensive findings gathered through the collaborative experience, together with the knowledge developed thanks to transdisciplinary exchange, form the starting point for this year's programme in Berlin.

Starting in April 2021, a public online discourse programme will convene key players from Southeast Asia and Berlin, as well as international experts – from the fields of architecture, art, science, and administration – to jointly reflect on common topics and possible courses of action.



In autumn 2021, an exhibition at Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics) in Berlin will present contributions from Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Singapore, and Yangon that examine narratives of postcolonial modernism and approaches to its built heritage in works spanning architecture, art, and academic research. Further contributions take a critical look at the implementation of development aid and socialist solidarity projects in Southeast Asia by former East and West Germany, showing their contrasting policies in this region during the Cold War.

Within the framework of the programme, ARCH+ magazine, Germany's leading discursive journal for architecture and urbanism, will dedicate an issue on the topic, published in April 2021.

*Contested Modernities* is an initiative by the curators Sally Below, Moritz Henning, Christian Hiller, and Eduard Kögel.

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## Partners and sponsors

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## **Background: Postcolonial Architecture in Southeast Asia**

Upon gaining independence in the mid-20th century, many cities in Southeast Asia changed dramatically in terms of their physical appearance as well. The task of becoming an independent nation was accompanied by the desire for a symbolic new beginning in architecture and urban planning. International modernism not only offered an aesthetic programme that reflected expectations of progress and prosperity, but also served as a means of emancipation from the colonial powers. Local modernities were created, based on an understanding of cultural specifics and the climatic requirements of building in tropical regions.

In Europe, this period of architectural modernism is largely unknown. In the region itself, however, an intensive discourse has been unfolding in recent years. On the one hand, it involves revising what, until now, has been a strongly western-centric notion of modernism. There is also the concrete question as to whether these buildings should be saved at all. Various initiatives, architects, and artists are engaged in re-evaluating the architectural heritage of an era of great importance for these countries – which is increasingly being lost in the Asian real estate boom. Last but not least, it is also about acknowledging a forward-looking (tropical) modernism, which inspires new approaches to urban design.

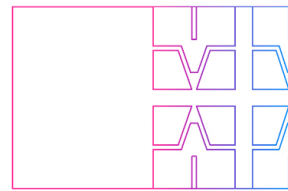
In Germany, there is little awareness of the independent concepts of Southeast Asian modernism and the current discourse surrounding them. Yet there are many historical connections between East and West Germany and Southeast Asia that significantly influenced the development of postcolonial architecture. Southeast Asian architects and planners studied in East and West Germany, and German architects and planners both from East and West left their mark on the region in the context of architectural “development aid”. East Germany and Vietnam had a particularly strong bilateral relationship with intensive transfers of knowledge and technology.

In Germany as in Southeast Asia, the buildings dating back to times of political change are often seen as relics of history. The societal principles behind the architecture have been lost in many places, and even the use of the historic buildings is often not easy today. Through public debate, not only should the importance of this architectural heritage be renegotiated; questions of adaptation, flexible reuse, and democratic participation also need to be discussed.

## **Online discourse programme Starting on 16 April 2021**

The public discourse programme extends the dialogue on modernism in Southeast Asia to include Germany. Key themes and protagonists from the locations mentioned will convene with initiatives from Berlin and international experts from the fields of architecture, art, academia, and government to jointly reflect on possible courses of action. Lectures, presentations, and discussions will examine central topics from a variety of perspectives.

The contributions focus on postcolonial architectural modernisms in their respective local manifestations and contemporary contexts; strategies for repurposing and refurbishing existing buildings; and educational and training concepts with the aim of local knowledge production.



## Building Modernities and launch of the ARCH+ issue *Contested Modernities* Friday, 16 April 2021, 2 pm–5 pm MEZ; 7pm–10 pm UTC+7

While the planners of the former colonial powers continued to work in the respective countries after the colonial period, young local architects, some of whom had trained in Europe, the United States, or the Soviet Union, began searching for an architectural style that, informed by their local climate and culture, would catalyse a new sense of identity. Some of these architects created informal networks that transcended national borders, and together they looked for ideas to shape the city in the tropics. How did these international networks work? Who initiated them? What conflicts arose between them? What were the geopolitical ambitions behind these initiatives?

Anh-Linh Ngo, architect and ARCH+ Editor-in-Chief: *Introduction and moderation*

Christina Schwenkel, Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside: *Anticolonial Solidarity and Decolonial Planning in Vietnam*

Eduard Kögel, lecturer, researcher, curator: *Julius Posener and Lim Chong Keat: The Malayan Architect on Trial*

Wee H. Koon, architect, researcher, educator: *An Emergent Asian Modernism*

farid rakun, ruangrupa/Gudskul: *On transdisciplinary networks.*

Against the backdrop of the previous contributions farid rakun and Anh-Linh Ngo discuss transdisciplinary and transnational networks and knowledge exchange between art and architecture.

## The Present of Modernity June 2021 – Date will be announced in time

Today, rapid urbanization accompanied by skyrocketing property values, as well as often politically motivated reassessments of local architectural histories, are causing the disappearance of modernist buildings in cities around the world. This phenomenon can be observed in both Southeast Asia and Europe. One case in point is Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics) in Berlin, which was due for demolition by the city. However, thanks to initiatives to save the building and a public debate on the topic, it was possible to transform it into a model project for the collaborative production of space, which is currently being implemented. But beyond that, what about other modernist structures in Germany and Southeast Asia?

## The Future of Modernity September 2021 – Date will be announced in time

What concepts are being discussed in Germany today, and how do they correspond to strategies being implemented in Southeast Asia? While initial experiences and successes are being made in preserving modernist buildings in both regions, these cannot be taken for granted. It is therefore important to exchange views, examine successes, discuss strategies, and determine what added value is created for society if they are preserved. What is the future of architectural modernism? What kinds of arguments – reflecting contemporary aspirations, local use, and ecological approaches – could help to secure a future for these buildings?

## **(Un-)learning Modernism** **October 2021 – Date will be announced in time**

Today, networks in art, architecture, and culture are working in Southeast Asia to challenge common narratives about and responses to modernism. The spectrum ranges from traditional academic research to artistic actions, research-based and outreach-oriented cultural work, and concrete initiatives for the preservation of buildings.

There is also the issue of decolonization to be addressed, given that architectural curricula at Southeast Asian universities have often been adopted from Western institutions. What kinds of educational formats are needed to enable new and critical perspectives? What are the political, social, and cultural hurdles that must be overcome? How can transnational, cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer be strengthened in the future?

*The online events will take place via Zoom and will be held in English. Participation is free of charge, but spots are limited and registration is required. The participation is free of charge. More information will be available April 8 at: [www.seam-encounters.net](http://www.seam-encounters.net).*

## **Exhibition** **Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics) Berlin, autumn 2021 – Date will be announced**

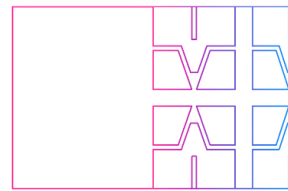
The exhibition looks at postcolonial architecture and urban planning in the participating countries and how they are seen today in light of contemporary urban practices and questions about the future. Exemplary buildings and established narratives on Southeast Asian modernism, dating back to the period after independence, will be critically examined, also in the context of current international discourses on architecture, urban planning, and building culture. Not only will the history of modernism's impact be addressed, in terms of its various influences and local manifestations in Southeast Asia, but also the region's historic connections with East and West Germany.

By interweaving postcolonial architecture, contemporary perspectives, and highly topical urban issues, the exhibition will advance the discourse on alternative uses for modernist structures and concepts able to withstand the challenges in urban development today.

The contributions from Phnom Penh, Jakarta, Yangon, and Singapore build on four exhibitions curated in those cities by the Southeast Asian project partners in 2019 as part of *Encounters with Southeast Asian Modernism*. They will question, expand, and complement existing narratives on modernism and illustrate expert and civic engagement in the preservation of built heritage in Southeast Asia.

A new contribution developed by the Berlin curators focuses for the first time on a seldom-addressed topic: bilateral relations between Southeast Asia and the East and West Germany from the 1950s to the 1970s. This project reveals the different connections and transfers to the region from the formerly separate German countries.

The exhibition venue, Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics), establishes a direct link to themes addressed by the exhibition. Not only does it embody a model approach for the reuse of late-modernist architecture in Berlin, but also a vision of solidarity and community for the city of tomorrow. It sets the stage for a dialogue, which will foster new insights into the history, meaning, and future of modernity at the intersection of globalization and local specificities.



## Contributions

*Folding Concrete 2.0* / Phnom Penh: curated by Pen Sereypagna and Vuth Lyno

*Visualization of National History: From, by, and for Whom?* / Jakarta: curated by Grace Samboh, Hyphen -, and ruangrupa/Gudskul

*Housing Modernities* / Singapore: curated by Ho Puay-Peng with Nikhil Joshi, Johannes Widodo

*Occupying Modernism* / Jakarta: curated by Avianti Armand, Setiadi Sopandi, co-curator Rifandi Septiawan Nugroho

*Poelzig's Legacy and the Prefab in the Tropics: German Influences and Projects in Southeast Asia*  
curated by Sally Below, Moritz Henning, Christian Hiller, Eduard Kögel

*Synthesis of Myanmar Modernity* / Yangon: curated by Pwint and Win Thant Win Shwin

## Publication of ARCH+ magazine *Contested Modernities* April 2021

Within the framework of *Contested Modernities*, an issue of ARCH+ on Southeast Asian modernism will be published in April 2021. ARCH+ is Germany's leading discursive journal for architecture and urbanism and is published four times a year. Each issue is dedicated to a different theme and illuminates the cultural and social context of contemporary spatial production. For five decades ARCH+ has been dedicated to experimentation in architecture and urban planning. By interweaving print and online publications with public events and projects, ARCH+ functions as an independent, dedicated platform for architectural criticism.

Using examples from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Singapore, this ARCH+ issue focuses on how the process of nation building was carried out in architecture and urban planning in the course of decolonization. Many of these buildings, which illustrate the young nations' aspirations of emancipation and are regarded as important examples of tropical modernism, are severely threatened by rapid urbanization. The authors of this issue advocate a critical reappraisal of these architectures, as well as their preservation and adaptive reuse.

Guest editors: Sally Below, Moritz Henning, Eduard Kögel

With contributions by: Ben Bansal, Ute Meta Bauer, Sally Below, d-associates, Michael Falser, Gudskul, Moritz Henning, Christian Hiller, Ho Puay Peng, Ho Weng Hin, Hun Sogkana, Eduard Kögel, Lu Ban Hap, Mam Sophana, Andra Matin, Pen Sereypagna, Poum Measbandol, farid rakun, ruangrupa, U Maung Shwe, Darren Soh, U Sun Oo, Setiadi Sopandi, Shirley Surya, Tay Kheng Soon, Vuth Lyno, Wee H. Koon, Johannes Widodo, and more.