

A Study of Shophouse Facades and their Role in the Expression of Ethnic Identity in Colonial Singapore

植民地シンガポールのショップハウスのファサードと
民族表現における役割に関する研究

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Abstract

Discourse about regionalism and identity in Singapore has to start from accepting its lack of a consistent or coherent identity. Comparisons between a globalized and homogeneous present and a supposedly purer Asian past misrepresent the essentially complex nature of Asian culture. Even prior to colonization, Singapore, and the Asian region in general, had been exposed to layer upon layer of imported cultures which had been localized over time, and adapted to regional conditions. Hybridization was not so much the exception as the norm. Singapore is chosen as a case study to illustrate the complex nature of ethnic expression and process of self-identity in Asian nations during colonization. Façades are outward expressions of a community's ideals and aspirations. The Singapore shophouse typology, in particular its façade, is used to examine the constant interaction and negotiation of the different strands of influence within the specificities of time and place.

Objective

The objective of this thesis is three-fold. Firstly, this study intends to establish a quantitative data bank of Singapore shophouse facades to compliment existing descriptive studies of the shophouse typology and provide an empirical databank for future research from an architectural perspective. Secondly, the thesis aims to quantitatively examine the evolution of the façade of the shophouse typology, the different ethnic influences during the different stages of the evolution and the interaction and the role of shophouse facades in the expression of the negotiation of these ethnic elements within the social and political context of colonial Singapore. Thirdly, this thesis intends to examine the mechanisms of ethnic identity expression through shophouse facades within the context of contemporary regionalism now to

better propose a way forward for Asian cities in search of self-identity in the face of globalization.

Methodology

To achieve the 3 objectives, a holistic methodology of field work and site investigation will be carried out in two ethnic enclaves of Singapore. Visual, descriptive as well as geometric data will be cross-referenced to establish a digital database for further manipulation and analysis to identify social, political and cultural parameters of ethnic architectural expressions in colonial Singapore. The observations and analysis of shophouse facades in Colonial Singapore will then be extrapolated within contemporary conditions of identity expression in Asia. With reference made to contemporary literature on regionalism, a comparison of the parameters between colonial Asia and post colonial Asia will be made to suggest a way forward for Asian cities.

Structure of Thesis

The thesis will be organized into 5 parts:

PART I : Background

This section of the thesis will outline the background and related issues in the study of the shophouse typology, and the relevance of this study relevance in contemporary Asia. This section will also provide a broad based review of current literature on the shophouse typology and its main proponents. This section will then outline the objectives, methodologies and structure of subsequent sections of the thesis.

PART II : Descriptive Study--The Singapore Shophouse Typology

This section of the thesis will concentrate on the study of the history and genealogy of the shophouse typology as it provides a brief overview of permutations of the shophouse typologies in different parts of Asia. A brief analysis of the socio-political context of colonial Singapore will be conducted to express the basic morphology of the shophouse.

PART III: Geometric Study--Fieldwork and Site Investigation

Empirical data collected from the site research and field work will be extrapolated to form digital databases and comparison charts for analysis and identification of design tendency trends. The databases

will form the quantitative framework for the analysis of the facades and its ethnic components in the next section.

PART IV: Analysis and Review of Findings

The vocabulary of the shophouse facades will first be analyzed at the elemental level. This study section attempts to clarify the correlation of the occurrence of different ethnic façade elements present in the shophouse facades. A cross-reference study will then be made of the similarities and differences in the façade development of shophouses in different ethnic enclaves. Subsequently, a compositional façade study will then be conducted to analyze the syntax of the shophouse typology. Individual façade elements are measured and grouped according to ethnicity. Analysis of compositional permutations, distribution patterns and relative surface areas of façade elements will be carried out to trace the nature of their morphological development.

PART V: Conclusions and Way Forward

The constantly evolving façade composition of the Singapore shophouse is a testament to a nation that inherited a multi-racial and multi-cultural immigrant stock. Thus, there is more divergence than common ground to draw on in the task of creating a self-identity. Singapore's experience is not unique but parallels that of many newly independent nations. It is hoped that the study of ethnic influence on the facades of colonial Shophouses in Singapore could help inform the complex re-negotiations of identity boundaries of the ethnic community in colonial Singapore and that an understanding of Singapore's case may in some ways inform the processes of regionalism and self-identity in other Asian nations.