

I interviewed Charles Correa and Tunney Lee on separate occasions. The questions posed are specifically aimed at introducing them to a younger generation, especially current students of architecture. Rather than ask them about their own work, I posed questions that addressed larger issues of style, culture, history, and working cross-culturally.

I asked identical questions of both architects in order to create a "virtual" dialogue. Note that their responses are to the original question and not to each other.

Biographical sketch

Could you give a brief bio of yourself for the readers who may not be familiar with you?

Charles Correa

After finishing my schooling in India, I came to the United States to study architecture – first at Michigan and then here at MIT. But I really learned my most important lessons after I got back to India and started trying to design buildings myself. I got an awful lot by studying the wonderful old buildings and cities there – as well as the new work by Corbusier. It seems like architecture is something you have to teach yourself as you go through life.

Tunney Lee

I was born in China, in Guangdong. I came to Boston at age seven and grew up in Boston's Chinatown. I studied architecture at Michigan. Later I worked for Buckminster Fuller, then in New York for Breuer, Franzen and I.M. Pei. After that I came back to Boston to work for the Boston Redevelopment Authority, then to Washington to work on Urban Renewal, and then back to Boston to teach at MIT. From 1990 to 1998, I worked in Hong Kong helping the Chinese University of Hong Kong establish a department of architecture.

On architectural style

Could you comment on the current theoretical debate on architectural style?

Charles Correa

Architecture isn't about styles – it's about attitudes. A good school, for example, shouldn't provide solutions to problems, but should teach you how to pick up a problem. What the problem will actually be depends on many other variables: the actual time and place in which you will work, the local materials available, the climate and culture, and so forth. These are the elements from which an architect forges his own natural style.

In this process, the most important caveat is to try to avoid making a superficial cartoon version of the culture in which you live. Instead, try to express the human and cultural deep-structure that generated those patterns in the first place. The genetic code, so to speak. And the further you go into the specifics of that deep-structure, the more you might find it turns out to be about universals – that is, feelings and emotions shared by other human beings around the globe.

Tunney Lee

Well, I'm going to translate this question to what is happening in Asia. If you take the statement "architecture always reflects what's really going on in society" as a truism, it means that China and Taiwan are socially and culturally very confused places right now, even internally.

Taiwan has gone from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy, and now manufactures everything from tennis balls to computer monitors. In China, the same thing is happening and as a result, the architecture is not as clearly identified as it used to be. Traditional societies are very clear in their intents, but modern societies and modernizing societies are much more complex and ambiguous.

What is more important is identity and identity is in here. (point to his heart) The external forms of architecture are out there and, by definition, superficial. So when looking at Asia, it's important to remember that to these cultures, what's in here (points to his heart) is something that is still in transition.

Working abroad

What are the positive effects, in your opinion, of working and teaching in two different parts of the world?

Charles Correa

Well, the perspective it gives you. I find the old buildings in India are wonderfully ambitious. A Hindu temple is not trying to be just a "pretty" building – it is a construct that seeks to represent the non-Manifest world in which we dwell. In short: Architecture as a Model of the Cosmos. Just as the Buddhist stupa models the mythic Mount Meru and the seven levels of Nirvana. In contrast, the buildings in our contemporary cities seem myopic and banal. Perhaps it is not the fault of the architects – but of society itself. What exactly can a 40-story office building or a 500-room hotel express – except perhaps the commercial aspects of the society in which they exist?

Then again, the contrast in the available resources in different parts of the world can teach us a lot. For instance in India, air-conditioning is a luxury – which means that an architect cannot design in a willful and arbitrary manner and hope that his mechanical engineer will bail him out. On the contrary. His designs must, through their very form and topology,

generate the micro-climate the environment needs. Traditionally, this has always been the well-spring of the architectural imagination – as witnessed in the wonderful courtyards and water fountains of the Alhambra in Granada, trapping and cooling the hot dry winds of Andalusia. A true Machine for Living! This is a lesson of fundamental importance – one almost impossible to learn in the United States.

Tunney Lee

I think travelling or working or doing a studio elsewhere is not that important for what you learn about the other place. You don't ever really learn much about the other place, but you will learn a lot more about your own place. You often see things done differently and you have to ask *why*. At home, you never question your assumptions because that's just the way it is.

For example, in America high density is bad, automatically. High rise buildings are bad. People don't even consider it as an option anymore. Well, are there places where highrises may be right? And then of course you go to Hong Kong and there is nothing but highrises! And you say, "Wait a minute, something is different here!" And then you really have to look at those assumptions about density. Who says? Or perhaps it's right, but why is it right? Why is it right here, but not right somewhere else? That's probably the most important thing to learn from traveling or studying abroad – to learn about the context for designing.

Problems in Asia

What do you see is the greatest problem in Asia right now?

Charles Correa

One of the most discouraging aspects of Asia is the number of architectural firms who see themselves as a kind of second-hand re-run of America. They are almost the exact equivalent of the kind of dumb businessman who sits in his postmodern house watching re-runs of tacky soap operas like *Dynasty* – when all the while they have their own traditions, which could generate wonderfully rich and different kinds of TV programs.

We certainly don't need to see ourselves as in a sort of queue, with all the various countries in a kind of pecking order. Only China can address the problems of China – and only Chinese architects have the unique and God-given opportunity of working at the cutting-edge of that exciting adventure. Just as only a mid-western American architect could have developed the Prairie houses of Oak Park. In that sense, all great pieces of architecture, from Fathepur-Sikri to Frank Lloyd Wright, are regional. By fulfilling these parameters so brilliantly, they become universal. In short: Asian architects should forget about what is going on in the West and start looking at their own context.

Tunney Lee

Well, there are a lot of architects in Asia right now who are trying to find cultural identity through architecture and, basically, they're on the wrong track. It's kind of like the story about the guy looking for something under the street lamp. The policeman comes and says, "What are you looking for?", and the guy says, "I lost my ring." The policeman then asks, "Did you lose it here?", and the guy replies, "No, I lost it over there." "Then why are you looking over here?" "Because the light's over here."

People are looking to how buildings *look* for identity, but you can't find identity there. It's not there. The perfect example of this was the situation in Beijing a few years ago, when the mayor of Beijing would not let a permit go through if you didn't stick some Chinese architectural detail on the building. Now, what does that represent? A kind of authoritarian communist party boss mentality that is disguised as a forward-thinking nationalism.

In the meantime there are housing problems to be solved in China. What is the emerging nature of cities? What about health care? Schooling?

When those get solved, architecture will emerge. But don't ask "What is the right stylistic stuff to express Chineseness?" This is the wrong question! It's like asking, "What kind of clothes should I wear today to appear modern and competent?" or "Don't judge me by my behavior, judge me by my clothes!"

The role of history

What can we learn from the past?

Charles Correa

The past? Here in America, I would look at a place like Oak Park, Illinois. If ever I saw a Brave New World, this is it. One feels the optimism of a whole new century getting underway – and Wright was undertaking the problem of inventing the way Americans were going to live for the next hundred years. He did this through his firm grasp of the cultural deep-structure we spoke about before – and through his intuitive understanding of the aspirations of the new America that was just beginning. Architecture is informed by the past – but it also must embody our aspirations, of what must come into being.

Tunney Lee

One thing ... I was sitting in an ARCASIA Conference during a long discussion on national identities in architecture and a Japanese architect said "Look we went through this when Japan was a fascist country with a military dictatorship. To promote nationalism and to counter western influence, the military dictators decreed that all buildings had to be built in the Crown Style based on traditional Japanese architecture. We were very happy to get rid of it after World War 2!"

Advice to young architects

What advice would you give to the younger generation?

Charles Correa

A friend of mine was working in Corbusier's office in Paris. After two years or so, he decided to come back to Bombay. Corb, who was very old and intimidating at the time, came up to my friend's desk and said: "So you are going back to Bombay? Do you have a job?" My friend replied: "No, but I'll find something when I get there". And Corbusier said: "Be careful, eh? Whenever you get to a station, there is always a train leaving the platform. Don't jump on just because it's leaving. Make sure it's your train".

I think that's excellent advice. It's a shame it isn't handed out to graduates every year.

Tunney Lee

Going back to the Japanese architect ... he also said, "I am a Japanese architect. Born in Japan. Trained in Japan. Traveled abroad, and did some studying and working abroad. And if I get a project in Japan funded by a Japanese client, why isn't what I do 'Japanese architecture' by definition? Does it have to look "Japanese"?"

What I think is important for your generation is the process of discovering this, because you won't find it by searching under the street light. It's not there.