

KEYNOTE PAPER

NZAAR-KN-18-70 PLENARY SESSION

Critical Regionalism; Architectural Identity in Malaysia

Robert Powell*

School of Architecture, Building and Design Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

* Correspondence: robert.powell@taylors.edu.my

PUBLISHED IN

The Fourth NZAAR International Event Series on Natural and Built Environment, Cities, Sustainability and Advanced Engineering
Keynote papers

Pages	1-11 of the volume
Held	27 January 2018, GTower Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
ISSN	2463-5979 (online) 2463-5960 (print)
Publisher	New Zealand Academy of Applied Research Ltd, Auckland

ABSTRACT

Critical Regionalism in architecture had its origins the early 1980s and became the focus of several symposia in newly independent countries determined to throw off the mantle of colonial rule and establish their unique architectural 'identity'. In 1989 the author of this paper devised a Taxonomy of Regionalism, which identified a spectrum of approaches from the Conservative Vernacular to Abstract Regionalism. In this paper the author revisits the taxonomy and asserts that Critical Regionalism is still in the mainstream of architectural discourse,

Keywords: Critical regionalism; architectural identity; post-colonial; conservative vernacular; abstract regionalism

HOW TO CITE

Robert Powell (2018). Critical Regionalism; Architectural Identity in Malaysia. In *The Fourth NZAAR International Event Series on Natural and Built Environment, Cities, Sustainability and Advanced Engineering*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 27 January 2018 (pp. 1-11). Auckland: New Zealand Academy of Applied Research. ISSN 2463-5979 (online), 2463-5960 (print).

NZAAR-KN-18-70

CRITICAL REGIONALISM; ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA

Professor Robert Powell*

*School of Architecture, Building and Design
Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya,
Selangor, Malaysia.*

*[*robert.powell@taylors.edu.my](mailto:robert.powell@taylors.edu.my)*

www.nzaar.com

Abstract

Critical Regionalism in architecture had its origins the early 1980s and became the focus of several symposia in newly independent countries determined to throw off the mantle of colonial rule and establish their unique architectural 'identity'. In 1989 the author of this paper devised a Taxonomy of Regionalism, which identified a spectrum of approaches from the Conservative Vernacular to Abstract Regionalism. In this paper the author revisits the taxonomy and asserts that Critical Regionalism is still in the mainstream of architectural discourse,

Keywords: *Critical regionalism, architectural identity, post-colonial, conservative vernacular, abstract regionalism.*

Introduction

Malaya (now Malaysia) achieved independence on the 31st August 1957. It was part of a process of decolonisation that began shortly after WWII. Indonesia seized independence from the Netherlands in 1945, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh gained self-rule in August 1947, and Sri Lanka and Myanmar in 1948. In Africa a 'wind of change' swept over the continent, as Nigeria became independent in 1960, South Africa and Tanzania in 1961, Uganda in 1962, Kenya in 1963, Zambia in 1964, Zimbabwe in 1965, The Gambia in 1965, Botswana in 1966, and Swaziland in 1968.

In the aftermath of decolonisation there was a growing discourse in the newly independent nations on architectural 'Identity'. The dilemma was succinctly expressed by the French philosopher Paul Ricour writing in 1965, 'In order to get on the road to modernisation, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past? ... On the one hand the nation has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revindication of the colonists personality.

But in order to take part in modern civilisation it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality; something which often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past. There is the paradox: how to become modern and return to your sources.'¹

Research Question

To what extent is Critical Regionalism manifest in contemporary Malaysian architecture?

Literature Review

In the first part of this paper the author traces the development of critical theory related to Regionalism and Identity. The consequence of rapid modernization following independence was the widespread adoption in many emerging economies of the ubiquitous International Style of architecture. The disquiet this caused in the newly independent countries prompted the discussion of Identity and Critical Regionalism, which consequently became the focus of much postcolonial architectural discourse in the 1970s and 1980s.

The term Critical Regionalism was first coined in 1981 by Alexander Tzonis and Liane LeFaivre,² who employed the expression ‘Critical Regionalism’, to describe “the reaction to globalisation in architecture ... and pointed to an approach ... that while inviting a ... world founded on shared values and cutting edge technology would celebrate local cultural inventions ... (and) respect physical ecosystem resources, and enable diversity.”

Kenneth Frampton responded to this in 1983 in ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for Architecture of Resistance’.³ Frampton asserted that, “The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place... It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site”.

Frampton concluded that, “Twenty years ago (in the early 1960s) the dialectical interplay between civilization and culture still afforded the possibility of maintaining some general control over the shape and significance of the urban fabric. The two last decades (the 1970s and 1980s), however, have radically transformed the metropolitan centres of the developed world. What were still essentially 19th-century city fabrics in the early 1960’s have since become progressively overlaid by two symbiotic instruments – the rise of Megapolitan development and the serpentine freeway. The typical downtown,’ he noted. “which, up to twenty years ago, still presented a mixture of residential stock with tertiary and secondary industry has now become little more than a *burolandschaft* city-scape: the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture.”⁴ Frampton

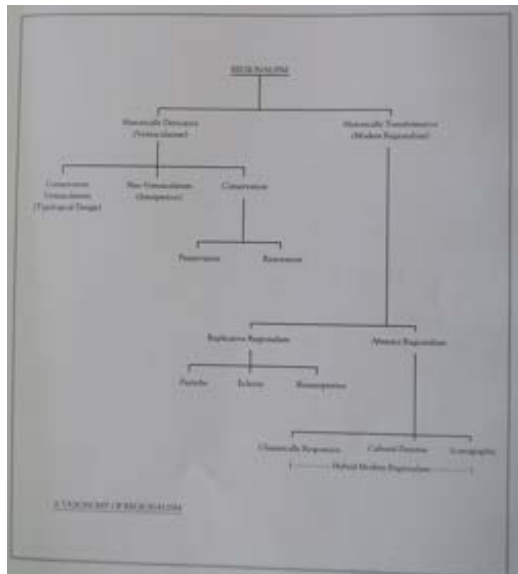
makes the same argument in his 1985 publication, *Modern Architecture – A Critical History*.⁵ His observations could equally be applied to the rapid changes of the urban landscape of Kuala Lumpur in the period 1987 to 2017.

From the early 1980s architects in Southeast Asia were increasingly engaged in the post-colonial discourse and in 1983 a conference was organised in Kuala Lumpur by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia on the subject of *Architecture and Identity*.⁶ A number of prominent academics and practitioners participated including Lim Chong Keat, Chen Voon Fee, Hijjas bin Kasturi, Ken Yeang, Parid Wardi Sudin and Ruslan Khalid.

The following year almost an entire issue of the *UIA Journal – International Architect* - was devoted to an extended article entitled *Vernacular, Pastiche, Modern? The Search for a Malaysian Architecture*.⁷ Ken Yeang, then the President of PAM, contributed an essay entitled, ‘Notes for a Critical Vernacular in Malaysian Architecture’. The issue included contributions from Hijjas bin Kasturi, Kumpulan Akitek, MAA, Lai Kok Kun, David Teh of Pakitan Reka, Jimmy CS Lim, BEP and Laurence Loh.

Discussion of Identity led, naturally, to consideration of regional expressions of modern architecture and two years later a second AKAA conference was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on the subject of *Regionalism in Architecture*.⁸ The participants included William Curtis, Charles Correa, Balkrishna V Doshi and Kenneth Frampton. The author of this paper was invited by the AKAA to edit the proceedings of the Dhaka conference and the earlier conference in KL. A seminal paper by Dr. Suha Ozkan, Secretary-General of the AKAA entitled ‘Regionalism within Modernism’ scanned

the various manifestations in the Muslim world.⁹ Building upon the essay by Ozkan, the author subsequently devised a Taxonomy of Regionalism.¹⁰ The taxonomy identified a spectrum of approaches from the Conservative Vernacular to Abstract Regionalism. It was later published in a monograph - *Ken Yeang : Rethinking the Environmental Filter*.¹¹



Taxonomy of Regionalism (Powell and Ozkan 1989)

An evaluation matrix was created to determine how the various approaches to regionalism could be incorporated in a Taxonomy of Regionalism. It was necessary to consider the Form; the Mode of Production; the Client / end user; the Construction Technology and finally the Materials.

Fig. 1 Evaluation Matrix for a Taxonomy of Regionalism

	Historically Derivative Regionalism (Vernacular)				Historically Translational Regionalism (Modern Regionalism)							
	Conservative Vernacular (Traditional)	New Vernacular (Contemporary)	Replicative Regionalism	Abstract Regionalism	Conservative Vernacular (Traditional)	New Vernacular (Contemporary)	Replicative Regionalism	Abstract Regionalism	Conservative Vernacular (Traditional)	New Vernacular (Contemporary)	Replicative Regionalism	Abstract Regionalism
Form	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mode of Production	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Client / end user	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Construction Technology	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Materials	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Evaluation Matrix (Powell 1989)

Following the AKAAs initiatives in 1985 and 1987, the question of how to reinterpret the rich cultural heritage of Asia into contemporary architecture exercised the minds of a number of academics and practitioners in the 1990s and in 1997 Singapore architects William Lim Siew Wai and Tan Hock Beng published *Contemporary Vernacular: Evoking Tradition in Asian Architecture*.¹² The book sought to reveal, 'an important architectural direction in many Asian countries where architects are attempting to reinterpret their rich cultural heritage in terms of contemporary idioms. This is achieved in different ways: by reinvigorating tradition, reinventing tradition, extending tradition and reinterpreting tradition'. The four strands identified by Lim and Tan were illustrated by the work of Charles Correa, Geoffrey Bawa, Hijras Kasturi, Bunnag Architects and others.

Liane Lefaivre, Alexander Tzonis and Brino Stagno revisited the subject in 2001 in *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalisation*.¹³ The book includes three chapters on architecture in Southeast Asia namely, The Green Agenda by Ken Yeang; Three Tropical Design Paradigms by Philip Bay Joo Hwa; and Rethinking the City in the Tropics: the Tropical City Concept by Tay Kheng Soon. Essentially the three chapters

reiterate themes by Yeang and Tay familiar to academics and practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia, but the publication expounded their views to a wider global audience. Most recently Lefaivre and Tzonis returned to the subject in a 2012 publication *The Architecture of Regionalism in the Age of Globalisation*:¹⁴

Contemporary expressions of Critical Regionalism

In the second part of this paper the author places the work of contemporary architects (and non-architects) working in Malaysia within the taxonomy.



Dwelling in Kampong Ulu Geroh
(Photograph by author)

The dwellings of the Orang Asli – the original inhabitants of the Malay Peninsular – illustrate the Conservative Vernacular in the taxonomy. The dwellings were built (and still are, where inappropriate solutions are not imposed by well-meaning authorities or NGO's) using a traditional vernacular form/typology. They are constructed using indigenous craftsman, for the indigenous population, employing low-energy technology and locally sourced materials. The example shown is of a dwelling of the Semai people at Kampong Ulu Geroh in Perak. Built without a professional architect or

contractor it is expressive of vernacular regionalism.

The traditional Malay dwelling (there are many variants) is similarly indicative of the Conservative Vernacular strand of the taxonomy. Each of the variants follows a distinct typology known by the master craftsman, the house is built for a member of the indigenous population, constructed in readily available materials and employing relatively simple technology.



Traditional Malay houses

The Salinger House designed by Ar. Jimmy C S Lim and completed in 1993 illustrates the Neo-Vernacular strand of regionalism in architecture. The dwelling, originally located at Bangi, is a radical reinterpretation of a traditional form that introduced a stone core to the house. The house was designed for Dr. Haji Rudin, a Muslim scholar and Puan Munira Salinger. It was built using local materials by craftsmen from the Bachok District in Kelantan on Malaysia's east coast. The house deservedly won an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1998.



The Salinger House at Bangi (Photograph by author).

The Conservation strand in Regionalism is represented by Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion in Penang (1994 to 2001). This is the restoration of a former residence to serve a contemporary function as a boutique hotel. The mode of production utilised an architect – Ar. Laurence Loh (who now owns the house) and a contractor employing many local craftsman as well as craftsmen from China to restore the original fabric. Materials were acquired locally and construction method is low technology other than air con introduced in bedrooms.



Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Photograph by author)

Moving next to Historically Transformative Regionalism (Modern Regionalism). The Reinterpretive strand of Modern Regionalism is illustrated by the Datai at Langkawi (1993) designed by

Singapore – based Australian architect Kerry Hill with Akitek Jururancang Malaysia as local architect of record. Here the architect has reinterpreted the vernacular. The modern form of the hotel reinterprets traditional forms using indigenous craftsmen employed by a main contractor. The building has a contemporary function as a high-end resort hotel for local and foreign guests. The construction technology is a hybrid of low and high technology (aircon etc.) and the materials are both local and international e.g. bathroom fittings. The Datai also won an Aga Khan Award for Architecture, in 2001.



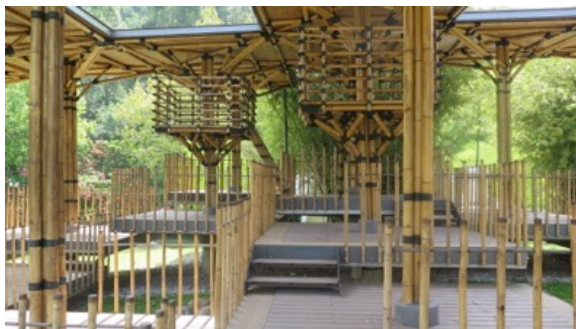
The Datai at Langkawi (Photograph by author).

Another example of Reinterpretive Regionalism is the Telegraph Pole House, also in Langkawi, designed by Ang Boon Chung and Ang Wen Hsia of WHBC Architects for an expatriate British client. The mode of production is a contractor using local labour, employing low energy solutions and locally sourced materials.



The Telegraph Pole House, Langkawi
(Photograph by author)

The Bamboo Playhouse in Kuala Lumpur's Botanic gardens designed by Ar. Eleena Jamil illustrates Reinterpretive Regionalism, using local craftsmen and traditional materials it is designed for community use. The Wakaf – a building typology that is found in the traditional Kampongs – a community-meeting place, inspires its form.



The Bamboo Playhouse (Photograph by author)

An early example of Abstract Modern Regionalism incorporating Cultural Patterns was the Dayabumi Complex (1984) designed by BEP Architects and Akitek MAA.



The Dayabumi Building (Photograph by author)

The project borrowed Islamic patterns usually associated with a Mashrabiya and these are incorporated into a strikingly beautiful

modern tower block. Built by a contractor and employing modern materials the form has moved a long way from the traditional vernacular. The building serves a contemporary function and is a successful modern building (though seemingly undervalued as an icon) that incorporates cultural references.

An example of Abstract Regionalism that is Climatically Responsive is Menara Mesiniaga designed by Ar. Dato' Dr. Ken Yeang. It was completed in 1992. Another Aga Khan Award winner (1995) it is responsive to the specific climate of Kuala Lumpur and was recognised globally at the time of its completion as a major breakthrough in the design of a high-rise building in the tropics. It fits into the Taxonomy in the category Abstract Regionalism and the sub category Climatically Responsive Regionalism. Designed for a commercial client – IBM – it was built by a major contractor and employs modern materials.



Menara Mesiniaga (Photograph by author)

Ken Yeang's own residence - the Roof Roof House - completed in 1985, similarly fits into the category of Modern Regionalism and specifically Climatically Responsive Regionalism. The house has a modern form and utilises modern materials. It was built by a contractor incorporating a variety of technical solutions yet learning from the vernacular in terms of orientation in relation to the sun path and passive cooling by prevailing winds. Two years later Ken Yeang wrote an instructive book entitled *Tropical Urban Regionalism*.¹⁵



The Roof Roof House (Photograph courtesy of Albert Lim KS)

Much of the work of Hijjas Kasturi the winner of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) Gold Medal in 2001, falls into the category of Modern Regionalism and specifically the strand labeled Iconographic Regionalism. The

Menara Telecom tower is said to be based on a palm tree seedling while the Malayan Bank HQ is derived from a Malay kris. The Tabun Haji building (1984) has clear Islamic influences.



Three towers by Hijjas Kasturi (Photographs by author)

Kevin Mark Low's design for PJ Trade Centre (2009) is a wonderful building for the tropics. A challenge to the ubiquitous tower block imported from temperate climates it has a permeable façade and a seminal design for a public plaza in the tropics. The design is said to be inspired by weaving of "songket", "batik" and "tenun". The building sits in the category Climatically Responsive Modern Regionalism



PJ Trade Centre (Photograph by author).

The Chempenai House - a 2013 residential project by Ang Boon Chung and Ang Wen Hsia of WHBC Architects also illustrates Modern Regionalism that derives its form from the response to the tropical climate. The bold use of the *soleil bris* places the house firmly in a hot climate. The house incorporates shading and natural ventilation of the in-between spaces, in effect learning from the vernacular.



The Chempenai House (Photograph by author).

The Visitor Centre at the Boh Cameron Tea Estate responds to the cool climate in the Cameron Highlands. The design by Huat Lim and Susanne Zeidler of ZLG relates well to the topography and public spaces are all naturally ventilated. It too fits into the category Modern Regionalism, responding to climate.



Boh Cameron Visitor Centre (Photograph by author)

The Kompleks Islam Putrajaya by Hud Abu Bakar of RSP Architects (2017) is another example of Abstract Regionalism drawing upon disparate iconographic elements in Islamic architecture.



Kompleks Islam Putrajaya (Source RSP website)

The Factory in the Forest in Penang, designed by John Bulcock of Design Unit is an instructive example of Modern Regionalism that responds to the tropical climate. Completed in 2017 the architect has extended the ecology of the site into the building. The building, designed for a

multi-national company with headquarters in California. produces medical products in a high-technology environment.

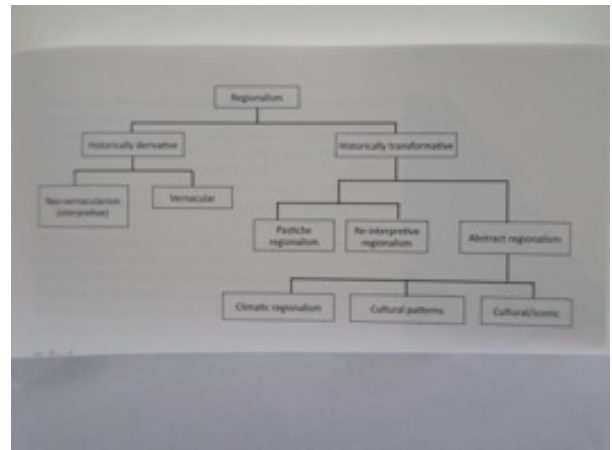


The Factory in the Forest (Photograph by author)

Future research

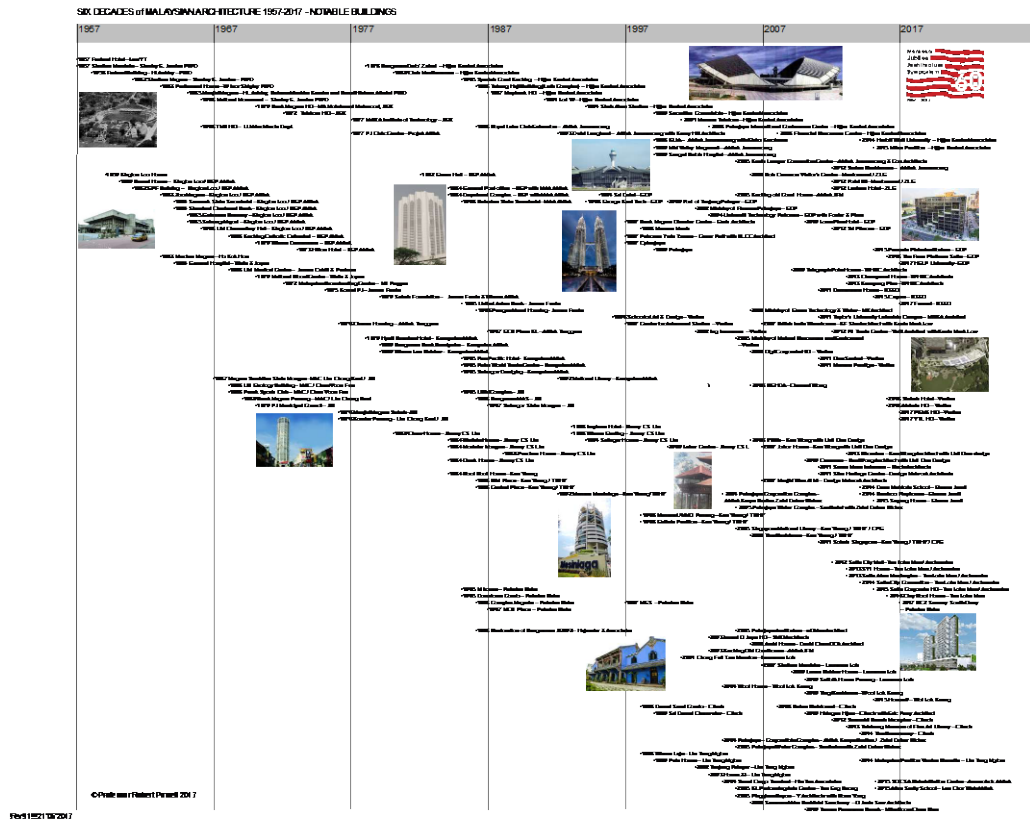
In the late 20th century the subject of Regionalism and Identity in Malaysian architecture moved from centre-stage as post modernism, deconstruction and tropical modernism prevailed. In the early 21st century sustainability, green architecture and concern about diminishing global resources has dominated academic discourse and practice. But in 2017 a new book *The Resilience of Tradition: Malay Allusions in Contemporary Architecture* appears to confirm a continuing interest in Critical Regionalism.¹⁶ Interestingly the new book cites the taxonomy from this author's 1989 Masters dissertation – Regionalism as

Cultural Regeneration¹⁷ - albeit in a slightly modified form.



A Taxonomy of Regionalism (Source: *The Resilience of Tradition: Malay Allusions in Contemporary Architecture*).

In 2017, the author compiled a historical timeline of architecture for the Merdeka Jubilee Architecture Symposium, held to celebrate 60 years of architecture in Malaysia since independence¹⁸. The timeline highlights the distinct phases Malaysia has gone through in each of the six decades. The key debate on Identity and Regionalism in architecture occurred in the third and fourth decades. But the timeline confirms that a number of architects in Malaysia continue to engage with issues generated directly or indirectly by the discourse on Critical Regionalism including GDP, Serina Hijjas of Hijjas Architects, Unit One, Design Network, DCA, C'Arch, Q Jade Saw and Tetowowe. The work of these architects and others is fruitful ground for research.



The Merdeka Timeline (Source the author)

Even as emphasis shifts to ‘Hybridisation’ and ‘Multiple Modernities’ it is evident that Critical Regionalism is still in the mainstream of architectural discourse, Ken

Yeang, paraphrasing Kenneth Frampton, notes that, “Critical Regionalism is about Geography and Ecology”. In short, it is about knowing who you are and where you are.¹⁹

© Professor Robert Powell
www.robertpowell-architect.com

References

- ¹ Ricour, Paul, ‘Universal Civilisation and National Cultures’, in *History and Truth*, Evanston, 1965, pp 271-284.
- ¹ Tzonis, Alexander and Liane LeFaivre, ‘The Grid and the Pathway’: An introduction to Architecture in Greece, 15, Athens, 1981.
- ¹ Frampton, Kenneth, in ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance’, in *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, p25.

- ¹ Frampton, Kenneth, *ibid*.
- ¹ Frampton, Kenneth, *Modern Architecture – A Critical History*, Thames and Hudson, London, revised 1985, p9.
- ¹ Powell, Robert (Ed.), *Architecture and Identity*, -- proceedings of Regional Seminar No. 1 in Kuala Lumpur (1983), Concept Media, Singapore, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1985.
- ¹ Dunster, David (Ed), *Vernacular, Pastiche, Modern? The Search for a Malaysian Architecture*. In *UIA International Architect*, Issue 6/1984, pp 12-48.
- ¹ Powell, Robert (Ed), *Regionalism in*

Architecture -- proceedings of Regional Seminar No.2 Dhaka (1985), Concept Media, Singapore, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1987.

¹ Ozkan, Suha, "Regionalism within Modernism", in *Regionalism in Architecture* -- proceedings of Regional Seminar No.2 Dhaka (1985), Concept Media, Singapore, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1987.

¹ Powell, Robert, 'Regionalism as Cultural Regeneration', Unpublished Masters Dissertation, School of Architecture, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 1990.

¹ Powell, Robert and Suha Ozkan, 'A Taxonomy of Regionalism' in *Ken Yeang : Rethinking the Environmental Filter*, Landmark Books, Singapore, 1989. p13

¹ Lim, William SW and Tan Hock Beng, *Contemporary Vernacular: Evoking Tradition in Asian Architecture*. Select Books, Singapore 1997.

¹ Lefaivre, Liane and Alexander Tzonis, *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalisation*, Wiley Academy, New York, 2001.

¹ Lefaivre, Liane and Alexander Tzonis, *The Architecture of Regionalism in the Age of Globalization*. Routledge. New York, 2012.

¹ Yeang, Ken, *Tropical Urban Regionalism*. MIMAR Books, AKA, 1987.

¹ Shireen Jahn Kassim et al, *The Resilience of Tradition: Malay Allusions in Contemporary Architecture*, Areca Books, Penang, Malaysia, 2017, Page 5.

¹ Powell, Robert, *Regionalism as Cultural Regeneration*, ibid.

¹ Powell, Robert, The Merdeka Timeline, in *Views, Reviews and interviews*, The Merdeka jubilee Architecture Symposium 1957-2017, Editor David Teh, PAM, 2017

¹ Ken Yeang in conversation with the author 5th December 2017.