

Oasia Hotel by WOHA.

BUILDING AS NATURE INTENDED

Tsunamis, liquefaction, typhoons, flooding – things are looking rather grim for our planet unless we recalibrate the way we live and build. Four leading architects from Southeast Asia may have found a way that will redefine contemporary architecture.

BY JENNIFER CHOO

In 2014, Japanese architect Shigeru Ban was awarded the Pritzker Prize – known as the Nobel Prize of the architecture world. This award came as something of a surprise for the industry not because of the quality of his work (which is unimpeachable) but more because Ban pioneered the structural use of paper in architecture. He has been building refugee shelters following almost every cataclysmic natural disaster for the past 20 years, using the cheapest materials – paper tubes, beer crates, shipping containers. The recognition of Ban’s tangential approach reflects how the profession needs to create quality architecture to serve society’s needs and foster a sense of responsibility when faced with humanitarian challenges.

This is particularly timely in view of the mounting number of violent natural disasters. While the image of buildings carried on a sea of mud in Sulawesi will remain indelibly etched in our memories, we look to four architects of the future to build a better environment.

Spirit in the Sky

WOHA Architects, Singapore

The skyscraper could easily be architecture’s least eco-friendly structures but award-winning Singaporean practice WOHA have defied this by radically transforming the soulless skyscraper into a highly liveable, humane and sustainable micro-vertical city. WOHA was founded by Wong Mun Summ and Richard Hassell in 1994. The practice’s built

projects throughout Southeast Asia, China and Australia range from apartment towers to luxury resorts, mass transit stations, condominiums, hotels, educational institutions and public buildings. Defined by a unique fusion of practicality and invention, WOHA’s work combines a local-specific approach to climate control and spatial planning with an international approach to form and materials. Environmental principles have always been fundamental to their work – work that has won an unprecedented number of architectural awards for a Southeast Asian practice: from an Aga Khan Award in 2007 for the 1 Moulmein Rise apartment building, to the most recent Best Tall Building Worldwide awarded by Council of Tall Buildings and Urban

PHOTOGRAPHS: WOHA ARCHITECTS.

Habitat, Chicago, Illinois, for Oasia Hotel Downtown, Singapore.

When WOHA first started, Hassell explains that they were designing single-family houses in the tropics – beautiful places to live this indoor-outdoor lifestyle that suited our climate. Then they started to question why a tropical high-rise couldn’t be like these houses, just “stacked” vertically. To that end, WOHA has formulated an approach known as Macro-Architecture Micro-Urbanism which applies city planning vertically rather than the conventional three-dimensional approach. “When you plan a building and you consider “urban techniques” in your design process, then you end up with structures that are vertically stacked and multi-functional: they will be integrated into the public transport grid, be places to live, work, play, relax and provide services. People will act in the building as they would in a city context. We implement this approach by designing buildings that are multi-functional and high-density but provide “high amenity”. High density

means less people commute long distances by car, which translates into less emissions and more time spent doing things you enjoy. It also means that you have a vibrant community at your doorstep; this is where the high amenity aspect becomes important. We can build more densely, but in a smart way, so we have enough community space, enough green, enough cultural impact, services, etc. to provide people with a sense of well-being. Dense design still needs to keep the human scale in mind to not feel suffocating or alienating. A successful example would be our latest public housing development, Kampung Admiralty, aimed at senior citizens. Feedback from the residents and people from the neighbourhood has been very positive, and the Singapore government will replicate this model across the island,” says Hassell.

This rigour and research-driven approach has shaped WOHA’s practice and become an integral aspect of their work. “When we receive a brief, we often re-define it for ourselves instead of simply reacting to it. Sometimes the design

solutions we come up with might not be right for this project, but we do the research and use that knowledge down the line,” muses Hassell. “Projects are very episodic with a clear start and finish, but our research is a theme that is ongoing, we are constantly learning new things and evolving – the research is the grand narrative and the projects are chapters within that narrative.”

Be like water

Shatotto, Bangladesh

As one of the poorest countries in the world and faced with more than its fair share of political challenges and natural disasters, contemporary architecture is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Bangladesh. Yet Mohammad Rafiq Azam, who founded his practice Shatotto in 1995, has been creating work that reverberates with humanistic vision and love for the history and culture of his home country for more than two decades. Considered one of Bangladesh’s leading architects, his unique vision pays homage to his country and the land it is built on has been recognised beyond Bangladesh. Rafiq Azam, a three-time recipient of the World Architecture Community Award, was declared the Emerging Architect of the world by Urban Land USA and won the Berger Award for Excellence, the Kenneth F. Brown Asia Pacific Culture and Design Award, among others.

Shatotto’s “Architecture for Green Living” tagline is a clear declaration of intent and is based on Rafiq’s belief that nature and the way we live are inextricably connected. “Humans are part of the overall ecosystem, they are not sustainable without green nature and air. The land is like the paper on which we paint a watercolour and if the paper is not understood, the painting will be a disaster. The climate too has to be understood because during rainy season one-third of the country subsides with water. Here, water is also a platform of living, people even live in boats, so you will always find a touch of water in my work,” says Rafiq. “Green living to me, especially in multi-level buildings, is connecting it somehow to the ground because that is actually what connects a man with nature. Layers of gardens flourishing on southern terraces which get the sunlight,



Moulmein Rise apartment building.



SP Setia Headquarters by Shatotto.

bodies of water on the north side and a roof as vibrant and green as a lawn. I try to enfold every house with layers of green which make the houses much cooler, more soothing and provide proper natural ventilation and proper light. The concept is all about living with nature.”

Much of Rafiq’s work has been private residences and apartment complexes but he is currently working on a cultural centre in Rajshahi and Bangladesh Chancery Complex in Islamabad, having recently completed the SP Setia Headquarters in Malaysia, the first private LEED Platinum certified green building in Malaysia, all of which are another manifestation of his green ethos. “Architecture is meaningless without climatic understanding. Climate change is causing rising temperatures and the increase in urbanisation in the capital has stripped the land of its greenery; here is where Shatotto has been working to bring nature to the doorstep of apartments, making them cooler and liveable for people. The buildings are designed to be naturally ventilated so that artificial air-conditioning can be avoided,” enthuses Rafiq.

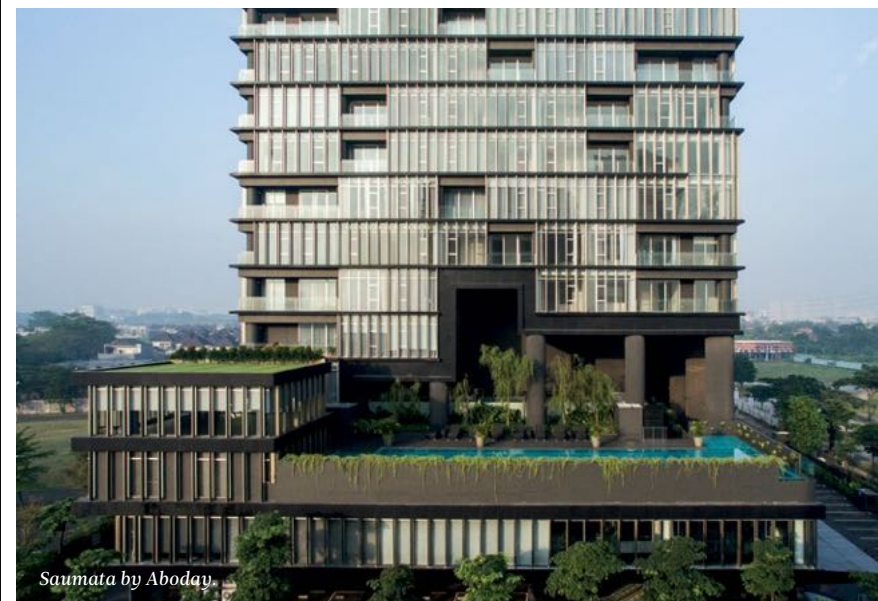
While urbanisation seems to be a reality which Bangladesh cannot avoid, Rafiq is not against progress, rather he feels that “advancement” should be carried out within a framework of carefully considered principles: “Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable nations in the world due to climate change. The country is very densely populated and limited land space puts tremendous strain on

the urban ecosystem. The capital is undergoing rapid transformation to catch up with increasing urbanisation. Green building assures efficient usage of water and energy and here is where Shatotto is working, to give humans a better lifestyle with nature incorporated within the architecture.”

Forged by Fire

Aboday, Indonesia

At the Venice Biennale this year, the Indonesian installation was a magnificent sight to behold. Called *Sunyata: The Poetics of Emptiness*, it featured huge swathes of paper slung across the cavernous Arsenale, allowing visitors to walk amidst the gaps – a meditation



Saumata by Aboday.

on the concept of emptiness in Indonesian architecture. Leading the curatorial team was Ary Indra, one of the founders of award-winning Jakarta-based firm, Aboday. The installation was characteristic of Ary’s architectural work – profound yet relevant, contextual and beautiful. Aboday is an acronym of Abode for David, Ary and Yap, namely Rafael David, Ary Indra and Johansen Yap, who set up the firm in 2006 and have been blazing a trail for their brand of contemporary architecture. Aboday picked up local and international awards, printed two monographs (Fame, Fortune, Flirt and Firmitas) and recently completed a new wing for the Museum Nasional Indonesia.

While Yap has since left Aboday, Ary believes that the tension that defines a partnership is one of the firm’s strengths. “Partnership is about differences. My partner is a left brain kind of person, I’m more to the right. Arguments and disagreements are what make us very productive.”

Contrasting working methods aside, Ary explains that instead of a distinctive style, Aboday prefers to evolve with the industry. “There is no signature style as we don’t want to be trapped in a particular genre. Architecture is a living creature, it will age with time and (depending on) its place and creator,” states Ary. As for sustainability? “To be fair, sustainability should be inborn in all Indonesian architects. We won’t particularly position our works as 100% adaptive sustainability but we always

relate our work with people (who use it), nature (where it belongs) and technology (to reduce unnecessary wastage of material and space).”

Ary believes there is much they can learn from the country’s rich architectural heritage. “As Indonesia is prone to earthquakes, many buildings from the past era had adapted simple methods to deal with potential disasters. Younger architects tend to depend on modern technology, forgetting what has been done for centuries to prevent such a catastrophe. It is sometimes as simple as using sandy soil for building foundations to reduce tremors during earthquakes. These ancient technologies need to be reintroduced in our architecture. In this modern era, a building code that accommodates the impact of disaster is needed, and it is our responsibility as architects to ensure this is implemented in our work.”

Down to Earth

Studio Bikin, Malaysia

For a practice that was only established six years ago, Studio Bikin has been kept busy. To date they’ve worked on an impressive number of private residences, interior projects and small- to medium-scale redevelopment projects spanning hospitality, residential and commercial properties. Let’s not forget Kedai Bikin, a line of locally-crafted furniture and home accessories designed by Studio Bikin which has flourished into a brick and mortar store and received the Innovative Craft Award (Asean Selections) from The Support Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand (SAC-ICT) in 2015.

Established by Farah Azizan and Adela Askandar, the young architects helm a dedicated team in their studio which currently stands at under 10 people. “We focus on constructing what we design – that’s what we spend time on, that’s when the magic happens for us; the experimentation, the organic adjustments to suit certain issues and conditions, crafting parts of the building, which makes the work intense. It’s almost like signing yourself up to a for lifetime apprenticeship – you learn something new in each project from the builders, the other consultants, and from the clients themselves,” says Adela.



Desa House by Studio Bikin.

Craft is a recurring theme in Studio Bikin’s work. Adela explains that crafting and building their ideas began as a means to explore how to resolve an architectural brief and at the same time, rethink certain conventional ways of looking at spaces. This goes hand-in-hand with context and materiality, the latter initially due to economic realities. “Many of our earlier projects did not have the budget for fancy materials, but we like to use simple, honest materials that age well in our hot and humid climate, that develops its own character with time. To make these materials work, a slightly larger proportion of the budget will go towards the labour cost, which allows the craftsmen to make a better living through their trade skills which are getting scarce. It is one way we can hopefully keep some traditional skills alive in the building industry, instead of replacing these beautiful polished/cast/washed finishes with cladding of imported materials,” explains Adela. The environment and sustainability have always been part of how the studio works from the very beginning and were not something consciously established overnight to meet environmental certifications.

It is not unusual for many architects

to establish their earlier works via private residences and Studio Bikin is no different. Adela explains that these residential projects present a set of problems that impact one’s lives in such an intimate manner that they require more creative energy to resolve. Hence they are more selective with residential work as it takes a lot out of them.

As for addressing sustainability in their work, Studio Bikin is a firm believer that grand gestures are not necessarily the only way. “We believe that every little contribution counts and change contributes to the larger whole. So we do our bit and are happy if others do the same. For example, the recent disaster in Lombok pointed to a desperate need to re-plan the sanitary infrastructure of towns and how the locals build. Perhaps once the studio is able to run a little more independently, we would have more opportunities to look into larger issues and be our own clients.” For the time being, Studio Bikin is content to grow by learning from the past and be more sensitive to local context when designing: “We believe architects can contribute to shaping a better future. However, without a sense of the current and the past, we might get lost along our own trajectory.” UN

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