CONTESTATIONS
Museum Precinct as a Mirror of Singapore

by

SOON CHENG TE
HD982554M
B.A.(Architectural Studies)
National University of Singapore, 1999

Submitted to the School of Architecture
on 17 September 1999 in Partial Fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT

Museums are constructs of political and social entities, hence, their
conceptualisation reflect the particular concerns of society at particular time.

In the manifesto, "Singapore: The Next Lap" (1990) conceptualised by the
Government of Singapore on the vision of Singapore for the next 30 years, the
issue of survival never left. The primary object is to construct Singapore as "one
of the major hub cities of the world", be it in terms of technology, knowledge or
culture. The National Heritage Board was formulated with the aim of "preserving,
promoting and presenting the cultural heritage of Singapore”. A “Museum Precinct” was proposed.

... can be the venue where such discussions are encouraged. It can be conceived as a place of experimentation, experimentation and... The conceptualisation of the Museum Precinct surfaces the ideals and dilemmas of Singapore. The Museum Precinct is only a facet in the larger whole of the dilemma of heritage. In structuring the museum type to reflect the aims of the state results in a history that is idealised and a heritage that is programmed. Hence, the question of heritage and its relevance within the context of Singapore has to seek other grounds.

Two responses within official and public discourse to the problem of heritage have been identified. The first may be characterised as traditionalism with an emphasis on going back to our “Asian roots”, guided by the idea that there is a straightforward, unproblematic return to a certain past Renaissance. In contrast to traditionalism, the second response is “cosmopolitanism”, resting on the idea that modern people can and should strive at becoming “citizens of the world” freeing themselves from prejudices, from the “yoke of heritage” in order to embrace the cognitive possibilities opened up by modernity. Both responses however are an unproblematic invocation of the authority of heritage.

The search for a national identity is a will towards unity and longing for stable meanings. The dilemma for contemporary architecture is how to engage in this discourse. Can this engagement with our contemporary city and culture elucidate an alternative role for architecture, in informing the creation and formulation of a “critical” cultural space?
Perhaps the museum as Forum can be the venue where such discourses are encouraged. It can be conceived as a place of confrontation, experimentation and debate. As Ian Ritchie succinctly puts, “by contents becoming events, and container becoming catalyst, ...a place not of study but of provocation and debate.”