ABSTRACT

The intention of this dissertation is to critically examine ways in which a regional identity could be manifested through the synthesis of modernity and tradition. The focus is on the Southeast Asia context, a tropical region. The first part of this paper will analyse the theoretical framework and arguments of the issue and the second part uses various case studies to illustrate the notion of the synthesis between modernity and tradition.

Modernism, especially in its manifestation of 'The International Style', has largely excluded local concerns for cultural identity and climatic consideration. It is, however, misleading to put the blame solely on the effect of modernism. Modernism, which has its roots in western culture, is often misinterpreted, especially in the developing countries. This is due to the lack of critical analysis in the application of modernism which come from a different context.

The search for a local identity has prompted regional thinking in the form of sensitive response to local cultural, climatic and contextual conditions. This is particularly strong in the developing countries, in Southeast Asia, as a step to resist a more dominant western culture. Modernisation, in another way, has given confidence to these countries through the increase in the economical power and the advancement of the latest technology.

A distinctive identity could be attained through reference to cultural heritage in architecture. The reference should not be merely borrowing of icons and images of the
vernacular. Instead, it should extract the lasting humane and artistic values in tradition and incorporate them with contemporary technology; thus a viable synthesis of tradition and modernity could or may be achieved.

There are in broad terms, two possible approaches in the synthesis of modernity and tradition, a direct and an indirect approach. While the direct approach uses visual elements of the past critically, the indirect approach reinterprets the abstract qualities for contemporary use.

Four built examples in Southeast Asia are selected to illustrate the application of the notion of the synthesis of tradition and modernity. A resort, two residential houses, and an office tower are critically analysed. The intention is to give direction towards a tropical regional modern architecture.