

## **In Search of Original Ideas in Architecture**

Why is the idea behind architecture critical for a project? This is because architecture is created twice. Before a building becomes a physical reality, one must have an idea in his mind before committing it to drawing. Then one must translate those drawings into built form. In the context of a thesis for a Bachelor's or Master's degree, this is very much the case.

During the design process, much effort is put into the research to explore all possibilities in order to get a "good" idea to anchor or justify the project. The design studios I have visited in our universities adopt almost a standardised approach to research and precedent studies, and one of the major issues that is borne from this is that the project outcomes usually do not match the data collected or the idea initially stated.

This talk is about engaging that issue. I find that many students (and in fact practitioners too) are attracted to the appearance and dramatic perspective of prevalent styles. This is considered "normal" since our student days. At the visual level, how can one resist the beguiling sketches and buildings of Zaha Hadid, or the minimalist designs of John Pawson? As a result, one can easily discern the "cut and paste" of styles that is prevalent among graduation projects.

I think the imitation of certain styles in architecture will be, to a certain extent, unavoidable - but is it the way to create meaningful architecture? Styles almost dictate that buildings are to be designed from outside in, but is it wrong for buildings to be designed from inside out? I believe there is a valid proposition from both approaches. I believe it is a careful balance of both, and it can vary from project to project. Still, how would an architect get the inspiration for an original idea? I believe it is by bringing the basics of architecture to the foreground; namely the **Program**, **Site**, and **Enclosure**.

### **Program**

In a real life project, an architect would develop or be given a brief by his client. He would expand on it, or challenge it if there are better options. In the context of a thesis for a Bachelor's degree, the program is more guided by the lecturers. However, students pursuing a Master's degree are granted more of a free hand, which could involve an agonizing thought process.

At this point of study, students are expected to have their own opinions towards the built environment and what they can contribute to improving its existing condition. This can be in any area of the human situation: social-cultural, housing, technological, etc.

An idea can emerge from a program when it is analyzed from the perspective of a human event rather than a perspective of satisfying a physical need. For example, the dining area of a house would evoke more interesting ideas if it is thought of as a lively gathering place for a family to share a meal rather than rooms of certain sizes that cater to a specific function. A corridor of a

school would inspire a more exciting atmosphere if it is considered as a social hub for student activities, rather than a mere circulation space for students to get to classrooms.

In short, interesting ideas are more likely to emerge from a program when it is understood from a perspective of human activities or events, rather than the original purpose of a space. It is, therefore, important for architects to develop a keen sense of wonder about the changing world.

A thesis project that has a strong idea is usually one that successfully identifies the pertinent issues of the human condition. It bears the characteristic of being insightful to a human situation and provides a perfect fit to the site, whilst cutting out all nonessential features in its design. An example of such a project is the “Living Museum” by LooYi (*Master’s Degree Thesis, 2018*). The proposition engages and expertly addresses the issue of reviving a socio-economic activity on a sensitive mangrove site.

The abundance of research data without proper discrimination can be overwhelming. To know which data to use and which to leave out requires a keen understanding of the issues at hand.

## **Site**

The site is a wide ranging topic, as it encompasses context, topography, climate, and physical limits. It is the land for a building to exist on its own, and yet it relates to the space outside its boundary. Sometimes, a proper survey of the site brings about the idea for a project

Putting a traditional Malay house in London would undoubtedly fail during the cold winter. The climate necessitates a response like passive design, especially during the present day phenomenon of climate change. Be it an urban site or a suburb housing lot, it must respond to the equatorial climate - its humidity and the direction where sunlight comes from at different times of the year.

When surveying a site, understanding its social-cultural and historical context often unveils a clue about what type of project can fit a community, whilst a study of its topography would show how the building can sit. However, the site’s identity comes about only when it aligns with the human events in the program. A landscaped patio outside the kitchen, for example, would be a delightful place for breakfast when it is oriented toward the morning sun.

In short, the degree to which the characteristics of the site are aligned to the intention of the program will determine the success of the project.

## **Enclosure**

The enclosure is a topic about how architecture is made. The medium of architecture is both space form (void) and material form (solid). Here, form refers not only to the shape but also its configuration in resembling the idea (“inform” means “with the idea”). Material form relates to the

construction, concrete materials, and the technology that brings it about. The issue in searching for an original idea is that many students find it more of a hindrance than an integral part of the architecture.

When the subject of technology is taught separately and not consciously integrated into the design studio, students will often misunderstand the role of technology in design. The philosopher, Martin Heidegger, viewed technology as a way to reveal the potential of raw materials. He writes that the wielder of technology should ponder how to shape a piece of timber furniture from a tree - as opposed to viewing technology as a mere tool to cut trees and utilising its materials optimally.

A strong architectural idea would often dictate the choice of materials and methods of construction almost as soon as the idea is conceived. '*The Therme Vals*' by Peter Zumthor is the case in point. From the choice of local black stone to the slit ceiling lighting details, they create the atmosphere he tried to achieve. Carved into the hill of a village, the building is distinctive yet it fits into the overall landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Design is a process of refining an idea. It needs work, not so much a stroke of genius. Recognizing that architecture is both abstract (spatiality, temporality, materiality) and concrete (material, construction, technology) - and that it is an idea that is derived from human conditions and events is what gives architecture a meaningful structure.

In light of the above, I see architecture as a necessary lifelong profession, because it engages human life directly. It not only creates but serves as the interstitial space for the men and women inhabiting its buildings. As such, for an architect to create meaningful space, he or she must discern the nuances of life by developing their skills in critical observation, reading, listening, and empathy.