

Dancing About Architecture: Music and Buildings in Asia and Australia

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In both music and architecture, the world is flattening. It may be, as the artist Takashi Murakami contends, superflat.² Some examples from the worlds of music and architecture . . .



Image: Cover of *New School Rock 1*, a CD provided with *Big O* #63, (Singaporean music magazine) in 1991. CD featured three Singaporean bands; *Opposition Party*, *The Oddfellows* and *Corporate Toit*. [artwork by *Big O/Options Publications Pte. Ltd.*]

OP, live at The Substation, Singapore, 1991

It's a punk gig, at an art gallery/exhibition space/flea market on a Sunday afternoon. The smallish crowd is excited. OP (*Opposition Party*), bearing a name with much more rebellious resonance in Singapore than here, are old school punk. Sex Pistols meets The Clash with a bit of hardcore thrown in, they soon get the crowd pogoing and slamming, though politely. More than one person apologises for bumping us as we stand there, looking a little out of place. However after a few songs the police arrive. Everyone is made to sit down. They comply quietly. The music continues, just as energetic as before, but with a sitting audience. At the end, the crowd quietly leaves, some smoothing down their mohawks before boarding their trains home.

Image: (top next column) *Performing Arts Centre* in Matsumoto, Japan, architect - *Toyo Ito* [photograph by *Dave Beynon*]



Toyo Ito's Performing Arts Centre, Matsumoto, Japan, 2004

In Ito's concert hall in Matsumoto the amoebic form of the exterior wall is punctuated by small blob-shaped areas of translucent, and occasionally transparent, glass. Inside, floors, ceilings and balustrades form distinct continuous surfaces, their materiality and the joints between them hidden. So is the structure, apart from a few thin white columns. The foyer is the space between these forms, a smoothly red-carpeted expanse that is punctuated only by similarly amoebic seating. At first glance this throws an oddly pale shadow, but on closer inspection, the carpet's colour has been deliberately lightened under and around the seating to produce this effect.



Image: *eX-Girl*, live at 'The Doors' Hatsudai, Tokyo, Japan [photograph by *Dave Beynon*]

eX-Girl, live at The Doors, Hatsudai, Tokyo, Japan, 2006

eX-Girl come from Mondo Kero (*Planet Frog*). Their Tokyo show begins with bright green lights and a huge frog-king backdrop. Out they come, dressed as space/sea creatures, waving inflatable claws in formation. Gradually they shed their tentacles, stripping down to orange PVC dresses and three-pointed jester hats and play guitars, bass and drums. They are serious and playful, cute and abrasive, saccharine and harshly noisy. They sing songs about love, but also about food, animals and outer space. Under the constant glow of their (now orange) lights and the beatific gaze of the frog-king, eX-girl manage to be both grandiosely epic and weirdly tongue-in-cheek. Unless of course they mean it.



Image: *Bank of Asia*, Bangkok, Thailand, architect - *Sumet Jumsai* [photograph by *Dave Beynon*]

Sumet Jumsai's Bank of Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, 1986

The Bank of Asia is one of the most distinctive sights on the Bangkok skyline. Approaching its twenty-storey bulk along Sathorn Road the building looms as a stack of giant cubic forms. However on closer inspection, it becomes clear that this stack of cubes is actually a giant robot,

with 'legs', 'body' and 'head', each articulated by strips of curtain walling. On each side of the 'legs', openings are surrounded by canopies that mimic robot tank-track feet, while its reflective glass 'eyeballs' are partially covered by louvred 'eyelids' that were originally intended to 'wink' at night, accompanied by lighting that pulsed to the rhythm of 'The Robot Symphony', a piece by a local composer.³



Image: Cover of *Escape from Dragon House*, CD by Dengue Fever, 2005 [artwork by Beryl Odette]

Dengue Fever's Escape From Dragon House, 2007

Dengue Fever is a group based in California but headed by the Cambodian singer Chhom Nimol. On their second album, *Escape from Dragon House*, their music echoes both California (acid pop and surf guitars) but also the Khmer rock scene of the early 1970s, where, before the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, singers like Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea combined the swinging and psychedelic sounds of the West with their own vocal traditions. Aided by the power of Chhom's sublime voice, on songs like 'Sni Bong' and 'Tip My Canoe', Dengue Fever remix and overlay cultures with seamless ease. There is the sound of Southeast Asia meeting the USA twice over, with body and soul.

Image right: Poster for *Über System, Revolver, Prahran, 2007* [artwork by Überlingua/Andrew Kelly]



Image: *Cambodian Community Centre, Springvale, Victoria* [photograph by Dave Beynon]

Cambodian Community Centre, Springvale, 2001

In many ways this is a generic suburban brick-veneer building. However, there are elements that are not quite usual. It has a double-pitched gable roof, and at the ends of each gable, large curving yellow finials. These are *chofas* (sky tassels), and their presence indicates the Cambodian identity of the building. On a nearby Cambodian Buddhist temple their presence symbolises the protection of *nagas*, mythological snake-figures that perform a protective role in the Cambodian Buddhist tradition, but here their meaning is generalised to refer to their Cambodian origin.



Lord Lingham, Prem K, Pataphysics, Potato Master and others at Über System, Revolver, Prahran, 2007

Melbourne's multiculturalism comes to life at one of Überlingua's global beat parties. DJ Lord Lingham and his post-world dance tracks are accompanied by Prem K on his electric *tablas*. Brisbane's Potato Master raps in Japanese, English and something in-between. Pataphysics MCs his way from Sri Lanka to Keysborough. A Zimbabwean, a Turk and a Chilean also mix rhythms, languages and beats. There are no boundaries, no categories, just beats, and lots of dancing. Old and new, near and far, everything is distinct and everything is blurred.



Image: *Home/Office, Richmond, Victoria, architect – alsoCAN (Jane McDougall & Dave Beynon)* [photograph by Jane McDougall]

alsoCAN's 455 Swan Street, Richmond, 1995-2007

This is alsoCAN's office and our house. It's a shophouse in the migrant tradition. To be more specific, it's a shopfront grafted onto a cottage, with its centre hollowed out to form a courtyard. The old kitchen fireplace forms a barbecue. The back has been extended upwards and outwards, a simple skillion box on the outside. Inside, it's a single volume, animated by a huge plywood surface that curves around the bathroom and

Dave Beynon plays Asian music every week on the radio. His show Enter The Dragon is between seven to eight pm on Friday evenings on 106.7 PBS fm. The music mentioned has all been heard on the show. Lord Lingham has his own show on PBS. At other times Dave is at Deakin University teaching and researching Asian architecture, from ancient temples to superflat futures. Or he's at alsoCAN designing the occasional building, and trying not to think too much about how to incorporate any of these ideas into them.

toilet before curling upstairs to create a nest for us to sleep in. Through the back wall, it protrudes just enough to form a small balcony and provide – if you lean outwards – those elusive city views. Otherwise the house looks inwards.



Image: Home/Office, Richmond, Victoria, architect – alsoCAN (Jane McDougall & Dave Beynon) [photograph by Jane McDougall]

Dancing about architecture, or writing about music?

One thing that music, architecture and other forms of contemporary culture have in common is that their most common expressions are genres or movements that have either begun in the West, or have been spread by its conquest, enslavement and colonisation of, and migration to, other parts of the world. Globalisation was once seen as synonymous with Westernisation. However, it's obvious that this is no longer the case. In the centre of Melbourne there are arcades full of shops selling bubble tea, anime figurines and Hello Kitty merchandise. Hong Kong movies are widespread. The CAE teaches Bollywood dancing. Bookshops are full of manuals about drawing manga. The suburbs are

dotted with Buddhist and Hindu temples. As well as Chinatown, there is now Little Saigon, Little India and Little Korea.

Murakami relates superflat art back to the Western-influenced woodcuts of Edo artists Karushika Hokusai and Hiroshige Ando. These artists were able to, and did, use single-point perspective, but didn't always choose to use it in a straightforward manner. In Hiroshige's *Landscape at Tango and The Ryogoku Bridge Riverbank*, perspective is used to position some elements, while others are portrayed within the same picture as being within a depthlessly flat space, their importance overriding any conformation to perspectival rules.⁴

Music, like art, can be quick, ephemeral, and cheap. Rules can easily be broken or bent out of shape. It can be serious or playful. Architecture, on the other hand, is slow, (mostly) permanent and expensive. Its connection with contemporary culture is more distant, damped down by the serious forces of economics and the weight of architectural history.

However, Jumsai's the Bank of Asia manages to be serious and playful. It was completed in the same year as the Lloyds and Hong Kong Shanghai Bank buildings, but instead of their coldly mechanistic representation of ducts, struts and pipes, it looks to a different future, an Asian cyborg future. Toyo Ito's buildings are almost as dematerialised as constructions can be, their forms melting into light and virtuality, like anime horizons. They have no essence, architecture is spread thinly over their translucent surfaces. Closer to home, Melbourne is the perfect location for creative overlays of architecture, culture and location – for the pragmatic jamming together of forms, details and spaces to echo the old and the new, the East and the West, the North and the South.

When looking at unfamiliar products of culture, such as music made on foreign instruments or to different tuning systems, or

architecture involving unfamiliar symbolism or rituals, we accept – perhaps too easily – that they are real. Yet when we encounter music or architecture that contains familiar elements, we are suspicious. They seem inauthentic, sullied by outside influences. Some worry so much about what is being lost through globalisation that they do not see, as Salman Rushdie once noted, that with translation there is not only loss but gain.⁵ ■

1 This aphorism has been inconclusively attributed to Frank Zappa, Elvis Costello, Laurie Anderson and Steve Martin.

2 Takashi Murakami 'The Super Flat Manifesto', *Superflat*, (Mada Publishing Co., Ltd., Tokyo, 2000) p.5.

3 Sumet Jumsai, 'Bank of Asia, Bangkok' *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, 23, (March 1987), p.77.

4 Thomas Looser, 'Superflat and the Layers of Image and History in 1990s Japan', *Frenzy Lunning [Ed.] Mechatemia 1 – Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006) p.101.

5 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (Granta Books, London, 1991) p.17.



Image: Cover of *Big When Far, Small When Close*, CD by eX-Girl, 2000 [artwork by Kazunori Akita]