

Esplanade Presents

VISUAL ARTS

10 Apr – 2 May 2010 *Tapestry* at the Concourse and Cones by Eko Prawoto

17 Apr – 2 May 2010 *The Temple* at the Waterfront by Eko Prawoto

An interview with architect/artist Eko Prawoto by Iola Lenzi

Eko Prawoto is a Jogjakarta-based Indonesian architect. With his practice Prawoto simultaneously addresses environmental concerns, the community and its needs, and the question of boundaries separating architecture from visual art. This quarter Esplanade commissions two works from Prawoto for *Tapestry of Sacred Music*. *Tapestry*, installed in the Concourse and Cones, and *Temple* in the waterfront area, a work of art come-structure that is open to the public and embodies both urban-shelter and spiritual functions.

Iola Lenzi: in the wake of growing concerns about global warming, people are turning their attention to environmental degradation. 'Green' is the buzz-word of the moment. You, however, through your architectural practice, from the beginning of your career, have always worked with your local environment, not against, exploiting local materials like bamboo and considering local climatic and geographical conditions when building. Can you tell me why you adopted this approach at a time when it was not fashionable.

Eko Prawoto: I believe that we human beings can't live without nature. Deep down inside our existence is always part of nature, we need nature. There is a universal language which is understood by everyone. Why is it an emotional experience for us when walking under the trees, seeing the birds fly, hearing the whisper of wind, staring at the ceaseless waves, or watching a tiny shining drop of dew on the tip of small leaves....? Those feelings have nothing to do with our level of education or how much money we that have in the bank. I just want to keep the connections that define our existence. We are not complete without it...

IL: Please say what the tangible advantages of this approach are when building in Indonesia today. I have read your comments about the devastating 2006 earthquake that killed thousands in Java. Can you elaborate on the possible symbiosis between natural conditions and architecture.

EP: Many things can be understood from traditional architecture, not just regarding the building itself. Architecture is always part of the larger environment. This goal of maintaining harmony with our surroundings is the most important reason. Architecture is just another layer over the already existing layers. Some of it has been there for many years, hundreds or even millions of years. When the disaster happened then we just realized that how little we know about the nature. We became aware that many things had been forgotten. That things were out of balance. The perception of village people about the natural disaster is also full of wisdom. They view it as part of nature's rhythm. They never perceive nature as posing a potential danger. This attitude is very important, in the tropics we don't need to protect ourselves against nature. Nature is our mother. Maybe we can learn from this approach, why protect ourselves from our mother?

IL: What is the role of the village community in your projects?

EP: The community had the main role in the (reconstruction) project. I simply witnessed the way in which the spirit of togetherness could transform itself into the big project that was the reconstruction of the village.

Outsiders may think that the earthquake destroyed everything, but in fact it's not true. Although the houses were gone and only rubble remained, the villagers' skills, culture, and spirit of togetherness was still very much there. We started reconstruction with that. We didn't build from nothing, the spirit guided us. I feel fortunate to be able to learn from these people .

IL: Do you think that your way of thinking about architecture is now increasingly mainstream in Indonesia and is perhaps spreading around the Southeast Asian region?

EP: Sadly not. To be honest, I am still in a learning process, understanding and remembering again about the laws of Nature. So many things have been forgotten, nearly gone forever without anyone having a chance to learn them. We are racing against time now. Observing Indonesia' modernization process, people's diminishing confidence in their own culture, and the increasing influence of global industry, it is clear time is running short.

IL: The idea of sustainable, frugal, environment-friendly architecture has parallels in the idea of a return to village autonomy as a reaction against rapid urbanization across Indonesia that has in some ways challenged rural social structures and communities. Do critics and intellectuals in Indonesia give your work a socio-political reading?

EP: We are still in the early stages of the process. It is growing now but I don't know how strong it will be. It is still not well known and understood, and seldom covered by the media, so politically it does not exist yet.

But you are right, in other countries it is very political. The minimum usage of industrialized materials has political and economical impact. I think it is very important also to promote the local economy.

IL: Singapore is an urban centre built vertically because of lack of space. Reclaimed land represents a significant proportion of Singapore's current land-mass. Can you comment on whether your approach to construction today has a place in urban Singapore and if so, explain how.

EP: Well, perhaps in terms of built form and construction this approach has only small relevance to Singapore. But in terms of bringing back the memory of Nature and reminding the community of the importance of the spirit of togetherness, it might be relevant.

It is more about how we give meaning to our lives. Material wealth may be needed but more could be done or should be done together to improve our life, to heal the world as Michael Jackson said. It is necessary to create balance between inward looking and outward looking in perceiving life.

IL: For Esplanade, you have designed and built a work of architectural art placed in the outdoor waterfront public space behind the complex. The piece called *The Temple* acts on many levels: it can be experienced as a building, not just looked at, but entered and felt. It offers a refuge from noise and crowds, its high walls not operating as barriers but rather creating an area of serenity. Please tell me how the work dialogues both with the space it is erected in, and the people of Singapore who will experience it.

EP: Once I was told that many years ago the area of Marina Bay was a fishermen village. We can imagine that bamboo was used extensively there at that time. So, I chose bamboo, as a way of creating connection with the memory of the place. The nature of bamboo will convey an ephemeral or temporary character, but at the same time it recall the memory from the past, it is very old. The meshing of the new and old, permanence and temporariness will hopefully speak to the people.

IL: Tell us more about the practical aspect of bamboo.

EP: It is not expensive, easy to work with and can last a relatively long time. Next year it could be re-used again, re-composed for another purpose. In a way I want to promote bamboo and push people to appreciate it more. It is beautiful, strong, fast-growing. People need to know more about it, have direct experience of it and then their appreciation will grow.

IL: Art and architecture are can be closely related in their visual forms. However most people have trouble with the idea that architecture, which is about function as much as aesthetics, can be assimilated with art, which is no about function in such a direct, tangible way. Can you please elaborate on your conception of the boundaries, or lack of boundaries between visual art and architecture.

EP: When we speak about the object the separation dividing art and architecture is there. But when we speak about the goal of improving life, then separation is gone. I am aware of the impact of what I do on the people. It does not matter what it is called it or who made it. I hope that this installation or whatever it is called, brings people together, unites human beings on a universal basis, makes them feel the importance of giving and sharing.

IL: *Tapestry*, which you have created especially for Esplanade's Concourse, is a work of art rather than a building. It is made of bamboo and recalls certain construction techniques. Please comment on the piece and its significance.

EP: Yes, it might look like an object on its own. But hopefully it will make people think about our role and purpose regarding Nature. It raises the question of how we should live together with nature. How far we can go transforming nature. Is nature only an industrial resource? Or does Nature have its own will and destiny? What is our role then? Tapestry interweaves nature and human intervention, allowing us to see the both sides of this question.

IL: Can you also give us an idea of the Indonesian context from which this fluidity between media emerges. I have been told it is unfashionable in Indonesian art theory circles today to discuss syncretism and the historical roots of cultural layering pervasive in the archipelago. However, despite the subject being passé, it seems to me fundamentally connected to your creative and expressive vision. Am I right, and if not, please explain the genesis of your comfortable marriage of art and building.

EP: I think it happened naturally. Since high school I have visited art exhibition and had discussions with artists. The encounters became more intense around 2000, when I was invited by Cemeti Art House to participate in 'the Art of Bamboo' exhibition. We were asked to build a bamboo object in Nitiprayan village. Since then I have had the

opportunity to make art/architecture installations in different places. This has strengthened my approach to architecture and has made me more aware of issues of locality. Locality has many implications, in every site there is already so much 'information' available. What we need is just to look at it and to hear the wishes of the site. What I learned from artists is their perspective and way of thinking, which is completely different from the linear thinking of the engineer. I try to combine those different ways of thinking. For in the end I realized that architecture is only a medium, its aim to improve life and share the values that you believe in.

IL: Do you get out and about in the region? Do you see other architects from Southeast Asia working in the same way as yourself? Much of developing Southeast Asia (excluding Singapore) has a fundamentally rural identity despite the exponential urbanization process of the last three decades. Do you see an interest in the region beyond Indonesia, in developing architecture that has local-based roots not just as a practical response to costs and eco-concerns, but also as an ideological statement thoughtful about modernisation, homogenization, and lost rural independence.

EP: This consciousness is not just my own. Other architects who have seen things in the same way include Father Mangunwijaya, Balkrishna Doshi, Geoffrey Bawa... I believe that this concern is growing, it's the spirit of the time. We have to share our own concept about sustainability. I believe that there will be no environmental sustainability without cultural sustainability. We have to develop the idea of modernization from inside, it should evolve openly but rooted in tradition.

IL: Are there any other points that you would like to make about your work?

EP: Well, The Temple is designed to work with the community and for the community. I will be happy if later people add another layer to my installation. I am imagining that people could use it for an exhibition, a fashion show, or even express their feelings with graffiti on the bamboos...

Credit: Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based critic and curator with a dedicated interest in Southeast Asian art.