

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH EKO PRAWOTO AND NATALIE FOO

Garbha (2012)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

13 Apr – 6 May 2012, Jendela (Visual Arts Space)

Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *Garbha* in 2012.
Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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Garbha is an art exhibition by artist, Eko Prawoto (Indonesia).

It was exhibited at the Jendela (Visual Arts Space), from 13 Apr – 6 May 2012.

Project Garbha by architect/artist Eko Prawoto

Deeply humanist values define the work of Jogjakarta-based architect, artist and educator, Eko Prawoto, whose portfolio includes a slum-upgrading project and the rebuilding of Ngibikan village following its devastation by an earthquake in 2006.

It was the latter project that brought Eko to international attention. He and his team, as well as the villagers themselves (including children) in the gotong royong spirit of togetherness had – in a record 90 days – rebuilt the village's 65 homes using salvaged and natural materials. The results were dwellings based on the traditional climate- and user-responsive limasan structure, but with innovations to render them earthquake-resistant. With this project – one not only about rebuilding a community's homes, but also its spirit – Eko underscored the link between architecture and social responsibility, a relationship not often acknowledged in today's fast urbanising world. By using local resources, engaging the community, and taking into account its surroundings, social fabric, architectural traditions and way of life, this was architecture focused not just on providing shelter, but also meeting social, environmental and spiritual needs within a larger sense of the living environment.

These principles are also evident in the installations Eko creates in his extension of architectural practice to visual art. Shown in exhibitions such as Junction 2010 Tasmania Arts Festival in Australia, Kamikatsu Arts Festival in Japan (2007), Regional Arts Victoria in Shepparton, Australia (2006) Anyang Public Art Project in Korea (2005), Arte all'Arte in Italy (2003), Echigo - Tsunami Art Triennial in Japan (2003), Art of Bamboo in Yogyakarta (2002), Gwangju Biennale in Korea (2002), and 17th International Architecture Exhibition Venice Biennale in Italy (2000), Eko's designed spaces relate to all the senses and consider the way our human body and mind engage with a created space. While large in scale, his installations, composed of natural materials such as straw and bamboo and featuring traditional building techniques, communicate a modesty, warmth, temporality and suppleness reminiscent of traditional Southeast Asian dwellings, rich with cultural and emotional associations.

Commissioned by Esplanade for A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2012, *Garbha*, meaning “womb” in Sanskrit, offers visitors both a social and personal experience. Made of bamboo, a material once presumably used extensively in the fishing village that was the Marina Bay area in which Esplanade is sited, it (as did *The Temple*, Eko's bamboo installation for A

Tapestry of Sacred Music 2010) offers visitors a connection with our nation's shared past. Open yet enveloping, it is designed to enfold the visitor in a tranquil, nurturing environment, redolent with memories of a more intimate, personal space, embracing the earth and the visitor with lightness of touch.

Natalie Foo (NF): Can you please tell us about your upcoming work at Esplanade?

Eko Prawoto (EP): I have made a space that people can experience directly. This bamboo installation 'occupies' the Jendela art space, a site-specific object, a space inside the space. Visitors can enjoy the journey inside that space, as well as an inward journey into the self – a journey to our collective memory of our past as human beings, a journey to a safe space that embraced us a long time ago... the womb... *Garbha*. This is a space that gives us hope and encourages us to share... to see what we have in common as human beings, to share the rainbow.

NF: All around the world, we see evidence of traditional approaches to architecture which seek attunement to their natural environments, approaches which are climate-responsive and renewable. Yet in embracing modernisation, many societies have abandoned these traditional sustainable solutions in favour of less energy-and-resource-efficient “concrete-steel-glass-timber” constructions. As a longtime practitioner of sustainable architecture, why do you think this is so?

EP: Traditional building knowledge is passed on within another sort of system; it is not 'scientifically' recorded and stored as in the case of knowledge from the west. Instead, it is scattered in the daily practice of the building tradition. Once traditional builders stop their practice, the whole traditional building system will collapse, because their knowledge lies in the hand, the manual work, the craftsmanship.

Traditional builders' use of organic materials is a good thing for these materials go through regular replacement and renewal. But modern people don't want to build that way. They prefer something long-lasting and maintenance-free, values that go against the principles of nature.

Much of traditional building knowledge is already gone, with traditional methods abandoned before they have had a chance to be studied. In the case of Indonesia,

there are more than 400 ethnic groups with unique building traditions, techniques and knowledge about local materials. Most university architecture departments do not include traditional building approaches in their curriculum. Under the onslaught of the global building industry with its huge variety of new materials, local knowledge is fast disappearing, becoming forgotten or remaining hidden.

On top of that is pressure from the media which is influencing people, offering a new kind of lifestyle. People want to be modern of course. And most architecture students are more exposed to beautiful books about modern international architecture rather than books about traditional architecture. If someone does not have knowledge in a particular field, how can he or she pass on that knowledge?

Traditional knowledge is more than just technical know-how. It includes the embracing of values and attitudes that allow for harmonious living with nature.

NF: Your work often involves the extensive use of bamboo and takes us back to times when it was a widespread construction material in Asia. Today, bamboo remains a low-cost, low-weight, fast-growing, sturdy, flexible and renewable natural resource requiring only a simple production process. Yet, it has clearly become under-utilised, perhaps even mistrusted, as a building material today in Asia. Why do think this is the case? How did we forget about bamboo?

EP: Bamboo is an old material from our Asian tradition. Since we only think of bamboo in that context, it is negatively stigmatised as being non-modern, low-tech, outdated, etc. Once during the colonial period in Indonesia, the building of bamboo houses was prohibited by the Dutch government after a plague caused by mice. Mice used to hide in the bamboo rafters of such houses, resulting in them being considered unhealthy houses. Traditional knowledge about bamboo began to disappear.

Bamboo is now being brought back onstage by foreign architects. As these architects have no traditional connection to bamboo, they are free to give meaning to bamboo as a building material. Armed with scientific knowledge, they are able to appreciate the positive mechanical properties of bamboo. Now, the creative possibilities and architectural language concerning bamboo are growing. We are supposed to learn again about bamboo...

NF: Besides the practical use and cultural significance that bamboo has for many of us in Asia, there seems to be something else about bamboo that speaks with us...reassuringly, intuitively. Is this something that additionally inspires your love for bamboo?

EP: I believe we are advantaged to be part of the Asian bamboo tradition. Our feeling about bamboo is deep rooted, almost part of our cultural genes. Somehow, we still have a special affinity for bamboo. Bamboo speaks to our heart.

It is important to keep alive the cultural gene of the community. I feel fortunate to be able to work with the village community, work which I believe can make the tradition endure a little longer.

I am still learning about bamboo. In the process of working with it, I am growing to understand it more... but I still have far to go.

NF: Speaking of your work with village communities in Indonesia, your reconstruction of the Ngibikan village received many accolades. Given the regularity of natural disasters and environmental challenges Indonesia faces, what impact has the success of the Ngibikan project had on government policy with regards to sustainable architectural design?

EP: It seems to me that we are in the midst of a transformation process towards modernity. On the one hand, it means that we still have a little further to go, but on the other, it indicates that we have almost forgotten our past traditions. The use of local organic materials and construction with appropriate technology are not very popular. New buildings created using industrialised building materials seem more and more in-fashion.

The lessons learnt from the Ngibikan Village Reconstruction were an understanding of the importance of social cohesion within a community living in a disaster-prone area, the fact that village people still have a strong spirit of togetherness which proved essential for the community's recovery, and the importance of a more sustainable architecture. The fact remains that a preference for and awareness of using more local organic materials still have to be encouraged and promoted.

Government policy divides buildings into two categories – the permanent, that is,

buildings made of concrete or steel and brick, and non-permanent, that is, those made of timber or bamboo. The term “non-permanent construction” attached to the latter materials carries a negative connotation that somehow overshadows their positive qualities in terms of tremor-proof structure and more sustainable architecture.

NF: As with many other parts of Asia, Singapore’s rapid urbanisation has had direct, some say damaging, impact on the environment. There is a need for the country’s urban planners to mitigate urbanisation’s erosion of our natural environment, architectural heritage and socio-cultural memories. How does your installation relate to this issue?

EP: Singapore is very special. With its rapid growth in many aspects of life, people here have almost everything that those in some other countries still dream about. Yet, everything seems too perfect here. This environment, in a way, pushes or shapes our bodies and minds to be perfect too, but it is a perfection almost like the perfection of a machine.

I want to bring something close to nature, something imperfect or even ugly, irregular, weak... It is about creating balance, about maintaining consciousness of our lives... a journey inward.

NF: At a certain level, architecture plunges deeper into the personal and crosses the fine line it shares with art. What made you want to take that plunge into visual art?

EP: Well, actually it just happened. I am just following the flow.

I don't feel that architecture is different from visual art. Both are media with which to communicate with people, to share some of the values that you believe in.

But yes, visual art offers more opportunities for it has more layers of meaning that we can play with, whereas in architecture, we have to first fulfill the basic aspects of functionality, building regulation, building code and other engineering requirements.

In encountering visual art, it seems to me that people are more relaxed and less formal, and it is more possible to speak heart to heart... It is more open to the sharing and receiving of other interpretations.

NF: Finally, what message would you like to bring across with this installation at Jendela?

EP: I hope people can enjoy it. As a structure, it is not yet complete. I would like to invite visitors to participate in the completion process. In that way, it will be our shared memory, our shared journey as human beings.

Natalie Foo has been a film features writer, a literary arts reviewer, the editor of architecture and industrial design magazines, a creative copywriter, and a writer and editor of publications at a performing arts centre.