Opening Address

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OPENING ADDRESS, by Soedjatmoko

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. It's a great pleasure, person-
ally, as well as speaking on behalf of the United Nations Univer-
sity to welcome you here at UN University headquarters. This meet-
ing, I believe, could be an important one - I certainly hope it
will be - especially because we are dealing with a set of problems
that will affect a very large part of the human race. It is my
understanding that in the back of our minds we are exploring the
possibility and desirability of a larger meeting on some of the
themes that might emerge from our discussion later.

I have been asked to provide some kind of introduction to the
general discussion on architectural identity in the cultural con-
text, and I think in doing so we should really bear in mind that
we are speaking about Asia and that we are speaking in Asia. I
think it is impossible to think about Asia and speak about archi-
tectural identity, without taking into consideration that we are
dealing here with a large and very varied continent in which a
large number of nations have emerged since World War II, and that
the search for national identity has been one of the major quests
in the last 35 years. It is part of the whole nation-building
effort. The search for national identity has to do with the forg-
ing of a sense of shared nationhood out of disparate ethnic groups
with different cultural and religious orientation, which have been
brought together by the vagaries of the colonization process - where
boundaries were drawn quite arbitrarily, often in Europe, in order
to accommodate conflicting European interests rather than by the
historical logic of political evolution in these countries in Asia.
The search for national identity also includes the search for a
shared sense of common values, out of very distinct and diverse
cultural traditions, each with distinctive world views, both in a
religious sense as well as in many other ways. The process of the
search for a national identity therefore extends itself in geogra-
phical terms, and synchronically, but also diachronically, in terms
of re-establishing some sort of sense of cultural continuity out of
the discontinuous experience of the colonial period. It became
especially clear to me after I had started to live in Japan how
profound the cultural discontinuities in Asia are resulting from

the colonial experience. And even though Thailand and China were never fully colonized, I believe that they too have experienced, to some degree, the disruptive cultural influences that have, among others, led to the emergence of a dualistic economy in most of Asia.

So, the search for national identity then, apart from the processes of, or the attempts at integrating these diverse cultures and ethnic groups into a sense of single nationhood has also been affected by very profound changes in the international environment. And it is impossible to look at the process of nation-building in Asia without taking into account the very profound impact of the international environment through communications, through cultural exchange, and through the impact of the international economy and international politics as well. So the search for national identity, as part of this effort at nation-building, has been a dominant feature in Asia in the face of the tremendous force of modernity in the industrialized part of the world. And no wonder that the process of nation-building has been accompanied by a great deal of civil strife, of civil wars and even the breakup of emerging states, or emergent states.

So it is against that background of both colonial discontinuities and the impact of modernization, or modernity, that we will have to look at the problems of the cities in Asia. These problems have been very much aggravated by the rapid population increase, by the large proportion of young people in the population pyramid. It has been aggravated by the very massive urbanization processes, and we should realize that by the year 2000 there will be almost 1 billion more Asians in Asia that have to be accommodated in dwellings, and in environments that will allow them to work and live. It is against this background, I believe, that we should look at the problems of the cities, the rapid growth of these cities. We are familiar with the projections by demographers of the size of many of the primate cities of the third world, and these are cities, obviously, without adequate infrastructures, without already now, the supply of potable water. Putting in place the necessary sewerage and other infrastructures that would ensure the health of all city dwellers is already totally inadequate and will become even more so.

These are, I think, the major features of the cities and it seems to me that it is very unlikely that the primate cities will reach the size and scale that demographers are predicting because of the

likelihood there will be civic collapse ie. the collapse of the social fabric in the cities and the eruption of civil strife before the order of magnitude that demographers are predicting will have been achieved.

Already now we are all familiar with the impact of unemployment, the hopelessness that many of the young in the third world feel about their future and as a result the growing crime rate which governments find it increasingly difficult to handle without violations of human rights. So it is, I believe, certainly right to speak about the emerging urban crisis, in the third world. Now, the picture that is emerging in Asia is, of course, quite different from the paeans of praise of many philosophers, I think, from Aristotle on to Mrs. Jacobs, recently, about the cities as the seed beds of civilization, the cities as the creators and the maintainers of civilized life. I think we, in Asia, except in Japan maybe, should be ready to look at most of our cities as manifestations of our failure: manifestations of our failure to resolve the problems of rural poverty, to resolve the problems of rural development with the result of the swelling of the urban population through massive urbanization and the emergence of these slums that now are so much a part of the features of urban life in Asia.

Added to that, of course, is the cultural chaos that has emerged from the cultural discontinuities, both in terms of the destruction of the sources of cultural innovativeness in the indigenous cultures as a result of the colonial impact, and also, of the urbanization of country people, villagers, and as a result of the impact of modern life-styles. All this had led to quite a chaotic condition of the cities, characterized by a loss of style, a loss of taste, architecturally speaking.

This raises the question - and I think we should look at this question with this background in mind - of what is the role of the Asian architect? What is his responsibility? What is the function of architecture in Asia? I think it is, of course, obvious that the urban crisis in Asia lies beyond the exclusive responsibility of architects in Asia. Architects cannot provide all the answers. But they are an essential element, I believe, in the ultimate solution of these problems. After all, architects, whether they like it or not, will be held responsible for the habitability of our cities. And, in this respect, I believe, there is some sort of continuation

of a tradition that was started by associations like CIAM, and the
Delos symposia and Ekistics. They have raised fundamental questions
that were particularly relevant for their time and I think archi-
tects in Asia now have to restate those questions in the context
of Asia and with the background that I've tried to depict. So, it
would seem to me whether we like it or not, that the architects in
Asia will have to concern themselves, not only with urban problems
and urban planning problems, they will have to concern themselves
not only with developing new architectural responses to the problems
that slum-dwellers face in the Asian cities, they will also have to
deal with the countryside, because I think the experiences of city
planners in Asia have shown that the more successful city planning
has been the more sharply the problems of the cities are aggravated
by an enhanced inflow of people from the country-side. So the
urban crisis cannot be resolved, unless in the context of improved
rural development. And as I said, the urban crisis is very much a
manifestation of the failure of resolving our rural problems.

The rural problems also will become a responsibility for architects
in Asia simply because population increase will soon turn villages
that are now of a size of between 5,000 to 10,000 people into set-
tlements of 20,000 to 30,000 people which will require urban infras-
tructures. And the question is, is there not a responsibility for
architects in Asia? Of course the problem of the urbanization of
the countryside is very much connected with the success or failure
of the quest for the industrialization of the countryside. It has
to do with questions that turn around our capacity to develop dis-
persed production systems that are efficient enough to compete with
production units in the cities; that retain the dispersed character
and the releationship with agriculture through the integration of
new high technology in many cases with traditional infrastructures
and technologies. Again this is a problem that is much larger than
the reach of the architectural profession. But I believe, as I said
before, that the architects in Asia do constitute an important
element in the solution of this particular problem. So let's say,
the urban crisis in Asia cannot be resolved, except by the disper-
sal of cities and the industrialization and urbanization of the
countryside. And this, I think, constitutes a major challenge to
planners, development theorists, and to economic planners in the
search for new urban/rural configurations that might relieve the
pressures on the cities that we now have.

The search for architectural identity, which is the title of the theme of our meeting, in my view, makes sense only when these problems are taken into account. The architectural identity of a nation, or of a culture, in order to be authentic, and not pastiche, will have to be rooted in and will have to be a response to the real problems of the society. It is out of that confrontation, out of that struggle and out of the value choices that will have to be made by architects that an authentic aesthetics can grow. So, we will have, in my view, to dig very deeply into the basic motivations that impel a society forward in the face of new challenges, but also we will have to look into the basic motivations that give the architectural profession its vitality if we want to address the question of architectural identity in the Asian setting.

So the architectural identity, it seems to me, in Asia should not be an identity that defines itself in contrast with the Western or industrialized concept, but rather should be defined by the Asian challenge itself, and by the vigour, by the vitality of our own cultures. And that vitality is very much related to the success or failure of the nation-building efforts that are taking place in Asia. To what extent will these new nations be able to generate a world view, a basic cultural attitude, that is capable of giving aesthetic and architectural shape to that identity.

Now, if this analysis of the problem that constitutes the background against which the Asian architect will have to function - is it possible to define the responsibility of Asian architects? Are those responsibilities the same as those in industrial, mature societies? Is it possible for architects in Asia to close their eyes to the architectural challenges that are posed by the slums and the slum-dwellers in their effort to improve their own dwellings and living conditions? Is it possible for Asian architects to close their eyes to the challenge of rural urbanization, or the urbanization of the countryside, which is linked, as I have said before, with the process of the industrialization of the countryside? It will require a different look at the available technologies and the emerging technologies - not only so that the use of technology is not determined by the experience of industrial countries alone, but so that the technology choice and technology utilization is shaped by the nature of the specifically Asian

challenges.

Finally, I think we should, at some point in our meeting, discuss "How do we create a constituency for the architects who are willing to address these problems?" How do or can architects persuade governments, persuade those in the private sector as well as in universities, of the need to look at the architectural challenge in Asia in a way that is designed to address these problems specifically? The problem of constitution-building is a very important one that architects in Asia will have to address collectively because there is no way in which the criteria as well as the standards of space and styles can be set by individual architects unless one or two architects are very lucky and are given commissions that allow them the freedom to give full expression to their concepts. This is rather unlikely and it seems that therefore collective action on the part of architects in Asia remains, or will continue to be, an additional responsibility that architects in Asia will have to take upon themselves.

These, Mr. Chairman, are some reflections by someone who is, of course, not an architect. But who, through his own life or experience in social planning has been brought up short quite often by the tremendous dilemmas that the present state of Asian cities pose to any planners. And it is out of that background that I have thought that sharing some of these reflections might be of some use to you in the course of this two-day meeting. Thank you very much.