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Hijjas Kasturi and Harry Seidler in Malaysia

Australian-Asian Exchange and
the Genesis of a “Canonical Work”

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In 1980, months after his unsuccessful competition entries for the Australian Parliament House and the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank headquarters, Harry Seidler entered into collaboration with Malaysian architect Hijjas (bin) Kasturi that proved much more fruitful. Their design for an office building for Laylian Realty in Kuala Lumpur was a departure from Seidler’s quadrant geometries of the previous decade, introducing a sinuous “S” profile that would define his subsequent work. Although never realised, Kenneth Frampton has described this project as a “canonical work” that was the “basic prototype for a new generation of medium to high-rise commercial structures.” But Seidler’s felicitous collaboration with Hijjas was evidently more than just circumstantial, arising from a longer term relationship that is part of a larger story of Australian-Asian exchange.

It was during Hijjas’s architectural studies at the University of Adelaide two decades earlier that he had first met Seidler. Beginning in the 1950s, prompted by anxiety about the fragility of democracy in postcolonial Asia, large numbers of Asian students had been admitted to Australian universities for the first time. Hijjas Kasturi was one of 40,000 such students sponsored by Australian Government scholarships under the Cold-War era Colombo Plan with the aim of building transnational understanding and new networks of exchange that might integrate the region and strengthen Australia’s geo-political position. Impressed as much by Seidler’s persona as a modernist in the heroic internationalist mould as he was by his work, Hijjas subsequently played a leading role in the propagation of Modern architecture in Malaysia after his return whilst further developing professional and cultural ties with Australia.



With reference to previously unexamined archival material, the present paper revisits the unrealised Kuala Lumpur project and the shared tectonic culture that resulted from the intersecting professional histories of its collaborating designers.

In 1980, Australian architect Harry Seidler entered into collaboration with a Malaysian architect, Hijjas (bin) Kasturi, to design an office building in Kuala Lumpur. The client, Laylian Realty, had originally contracted Hijjas and it was upon his initiative to engage an eminent foreign practitioner as a collaborating consultant that Seidler came to be involved. Hijjas and Seidler were to spend the next two years developing and detailing their joint design to a relatively advanced stage before the project was ultimately shelved by the client. However, the un-realised scheme was to serve as a seminal prototype for much of the subsequent independent work by both architects. Indeed, Kenneth Frampton has described the project as a “canonical work” in the oeuvre of Seidler.¹ In spite of such specific critical recognition, and increasing scholarly interest in general in the work and careers of both Seidler and Hijjas, this project and the related context of collaboration has not yet been examined in any depth. This oversight possibly stems from the limits of the current theoretical frameworks within which such a collaborative project of the early 1980s between an internationally recognised Australian master of modernism and a younger Asian neophyte may be interpreted. This paper therefore aims to examine the particular architectural history and significance of this little known project, as well as the historiographical issues that the case raises. With reference to previously unexamined archival material and a series of different theoretical standpoints, the paper will first examine the historical circumstances of this design collaboration and the subsequent impact of the Malaysian project on the careers of its designers.² It will then consider the theoretical limitations encountered in attempting to frame this project, calling for an “opening of the canon” of architectural modernism itself.

1. Kenneth Frampton and Philip Drew, *Harry Seidler: Four Decades of Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 96.

2. The archival material is sourced from the private collection of Hijjas Kasturi and from the Harry Seidler collection of architectural drawings 1948-1987, State Library New South Wales (hereafter cited as Harry Seidler Collection).

3. Hijjas Kasturi, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, July 18, 2012.

Collaboration as Cold-War Technical Exchange

The 1980 collaboration between Hijjas Kasturi and Harry Seidler was not simply born of a momentary desire by the client to engage a famous foreign architect. Hijjas had first met Seidler in 1962 while on a university field trip to Sydney.³ At

4. Seidler had only moved to Australia in 1948 but in 1951 he won the John Sulman Medal for his work on the Rose Seidler House, and by 1954 had already published a monograph of his works in Australia. See Harry Seidler, *Houses, Interiors, Projects* (Sydney: Associated General Publications, 1954).

5. The Colombo Plan scholarship and its relationship with Modern architectural education in Australian universities has been explored in greater detail in previous SAHANZ publications including Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava, "Building a New University in Cold War Asia: The Colombo Plan and Architecture at UNSW in the 1950s and 60s," in *Audience: 28th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, eds. Antony Moulis and Deborah van der Plaats (Brisbane: SAHANZ, 2011); and Peter Scriver, "Edge of Empire or Edge of Asia?: 'Placing' Australia in the expanding mid-twentieth century discourse on Modern Architecture," *Cultural Crossroads: 26th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Julia Gatley (Auckland: SAHANZ, 2009).

6. The architecture program at the University of Adelaide had troubled beginnings and amidst problems of resources the course had only just become available in 1958. See Rob Linn, *50 Years of Design Teaching: The School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design, University of Adelaide, 1958-2008* (Adelaide: OpenBook Howden, 2008). Hijjas acknowledges the meeting with Seidler as a keen memory which prompted him to abandon his studies at Adelaide and shift to Melbourne.

7. See Daniel Ockman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004).

the time, Hijjas was a young architecture student studying at the University of Adelaide, while Seidler had already established himself as an important practitioner of modern architecture in Australia.⁴ Hijjas's arrival in Australia had been enabled by the recently instated Colombo Plan Scholarship program, and as a twenty-three year old citizen of the newly independent nation of Malaya this opportunity to gain coveted overseas training in technical and professional fields, in his case an architectural education, was an invocation to help lead the new country on the path to progress and modernity.⁵ Within the post-colonial context of national developmental and economic aid, Hijjas's shift from Malaya to Australia was conceived, therefore, as a shift from the Third World "periphery" to a First World "centre" of expertise. For the eager and ambitious prospective architect that the young Hijjas evidently was, however, the only recently established architectural degree course at the University of Adelaide did not yet offer the dynamic, metropolitan experience of the "centre" he had hoped for. So the opportunity to meet a well-regarded and prolific architect like Harry Seidler in Sydney was greatly welcome.⁶

The relationship of Malaya and Australia in the context of Cold-War era technical exchange is an important one to understand. As colonial outposts, both the former British Malaya and Australia were parts of the geographical periphery of the British Empire, and in terms of architectural ideas seemingly irrelevant to the centre of debate in London. However, in the post-World War II context of de-colonisation this relationship had changed, and as a proponent of the democratic First World ideals in the region this antipodean outpost of the former Empire was now a frontline nation in the new globally extended definition of "The West," serving as a regional centre. Australia's own political insecurities in the face of advancing communism, which was rapidly spreading across the neighbouring South East Asian region, meant that Australia was willing to divert its limited resources to serve in this new role. Consequently Australia took keen interest in the Colombo Plan initiative, and while it did not possess the means to provide monetary assistance, it opened its borders to hordes of Asian students who were provided scholarships to study in Australia under the Technical Co-operation Scheme of the Colombo Plan.⁷ More so than a development aid initiative, then, the Colombo Plan scholarship was a strategic operation to contain the communist incursion through South East Asia—the regional peripheries of the West.



It is not hard to argue that Hijjas was a successful product of this Cold War initiative, who helped the propagation of “free-world” ideals in South East Asia through modern architecture. Upon his return, Hijjas was responsible for setting up one of the first architecture courses in the nation at Institut Teknologi MARA. He subsequently formed a collaborative design practice, Akitek Bersekutu (Architects’ Collaborative), along the lines of Gropius’s TAC model. While the first decade of practice was taken up by smaller residential projects, Hijjas’s sights were set on the futuristic visions of high-rise cities that he had observed in Australia.⁸ Accordingly, in 1977 he broke away from his previous partnership and started his own practice under Hijjas Kasturi Associates (HKAS), which was responsible for designing some of the tallest buildings in Kuala Lumpur that still define the city’s skyline.

8. This is in reference to Seidler’s work for the 1957 proposal for McMahons Point in Sydney and the Australia Square project in the early 1960s, both of which were discussed extensively in the media while Hijjas was in Australia.

Seen as following from this context of Cold War technical exchange, Hijjas’s collaboration with Seidler can be read as a derivative of the centre/periphery dichotomy established as a master/apprentice relationship. Here Hijjas, as an Asian architect, becomes part of an anti-communist strategy to distribute along the periphery the ideals of a modern style, as originally developed and expressed by the expert and his mentor Harry Seidler within the regional centre. Consequently the features of Hijjas’s architecture, such as the ceiling of Tabung Haji (1984) with its similarity to Nervi’s radial structural system adopted for Seidler’s Australia Square (1967) and the curved annex of Menara Apera-ULG (now Menara ING) of 1984 with its similarity to the MLC complex in Melbourne (1978), serve as evidence of this transfer of expertise and the birth of a derivative modernism in Malaysia. Indeed, then, the context of collaboration has little to offer to any architectural commentator or historian as the Malaysian derivative shall always remain secondary to the masterful works of Seidler. What makes the recognition of the values of such a collaboration harder still is that, as a product of the Cold War ideology, Hijjas himself has a reverence for Seidler that makes him quickly adopt the position of a humble student, and researchers dependent on interview accounts to construct the historical narrative perpetuate this subservient role as historical truth.⁹

9. See Paul McGillick, *Concrete, Metal, Glass: Hijjas Kasturi Associates, Selected Works 1977-2007* (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didlar Millet, 2006).

The limitations of the centre/periphery model have been argued before and do not need to be repeated in the context of this paper. However, it is worth noting that evaluated within

the historical frame of Cold War economic and developmental aid, the work of Asian architects continue to be understood through this one-way interpretation of the term exchange, and are thus regarded as derivatives of a modern type developed in the Western centre. Abandoning this centre/periphery model of interpretation, the paper now turns to a different theoretical stance to evaluate this context of exchange, and attempt a less prejudicial account of the collaboration.

Toward Asian Theatres of Practice in the 1970s

Looking at Hijjas Kasturi's oeuvre, it is evident that the partnership with Seidler came at a crucial time in Hijjas's career. Hijjas had only established his own independent practice in 1977 and had little experience in the construction of high-rise buildings. At such a juncture the chance to collaborate with one of the most renowned practitioners in the region not only allowed him to gain confidence in his own efforts but also helped develop an understanding of tectonic strategies in high-rise construction. In the 1970s use of specialised concrete construction for high-rise structures was not commonplace in Malaysia, and Seidler's support allowed Hijjas to build a reputation in large expressive concrete towers that defined his work over the coming decades.¹⁰ It is, however, worth noting that before calling upon Seidler to collaborate, Hijjas had already built the Bangunan Dato' Zainal

10. See arguments for extended experiments with concrete that defined this phase of Hijjas Kasturi's practice in McGillick, *Concrete, Metal, Glass*.

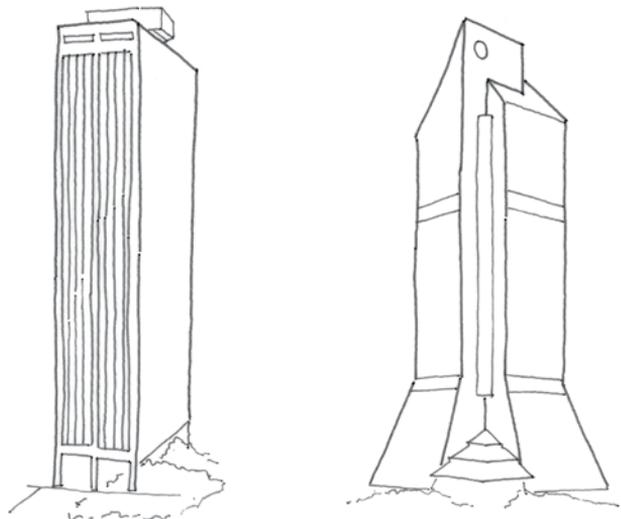


Figure 1. Hijjas Kasturi's earliest high-rise designs: Bangunan Dato' Zainal (1978) and Menara Maybank (completed 1987). (Drawing by author. Adapted from photos courtesy of Hijjas Kasturi Associates)



building in Kuala Lumpur in 1978. The twenty-six storey tower with a simple rectilinear plan and a central service core was not particularly innovative in terms of modern high-rise construction, but its refusal to accommodate vernacular kampong style renderings made it the first high-rise in Kuala Lumpur to unapologetically adopt the International Style. The building's use of vertical mullion columns displayed a distinct leaning towards Minoru Yamasaki's work of the 1960s and 70s. More importantly—although it did not get constructed until much later in 1987—Hijjas had won the international competition for the design of Menara Maybank in 1979, which at fifty-six storeys was then the tallest building proposed for Kuala Lumpur. With these and other developing projects, such as the Laylian Realty project, the three year period preceding the collaboration with Seidler had proven highly successful for Hijjas's new practice.

On the other hand, Seidler's practice in the mid and late 1970s had not seen similar opportunities. While Seidler had completed the renowned Australia Square in 1967 and his 1972 commission for the MLC Centre in Sydney had recently been completed, many of his other high-rise projects had not come to fruition. Indeed Seidler's work over the mid and late 1970s had been limited to a series of government offices in Canberra and the much regarded embassy project in Paris. Seidler's involvement in government commissions and the embassy project are of particular interest here. With the oil crisis of the early 1970s and the resulting economic impact on Western economies, Australia had sunk into economic recession by the mid-1970s. The subsequent failure of the Whitlam Government meant that Seidler's government commissions began to fall through and this had a drastic impact on his practice, with staff numbers being reduced to half the original number. The recession of the practice in Australia combined with the offshore experience and accolades for the Paris Embassy project prompted Seidler to establish himself globally and look beyond Australian borders. Accordingly, in 1976-77 Seidler took up a teaching appointment at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and subsequently spent time at the University of British Columbia and the University of Virginia.

It was this period of Seidler's career, when he was exploring foreign theatres of discourse and practice, that took him to Asia. The collaboration with Hijjas Kasturi was not Seidler's first attempt at building in Asia. In the early 1970s his office had

11. Report (1976), "Australian Embassy, Peking," MLMSS 7078/28, Harry Seidler - architectural reports and proposals, 1957-1990, State Library of New South Wales.

12. Leon van Schaik, "Province and Metropolis," *AA Files* 14 (1987): 48-54; Leon van Schaik, "Province and Metropolis," in *Architectural Associations: The Idea of the City*, ed. Robin Middleton (London: Architectural Association, 1996), 156-178; and Leon van Schaik, "Architecture in Asia: Province and Metropolis," in *Asian Architects*, ed. Tan Kok Meng (Singapore: Select Books, 2000), 15-31.

13. Leon van Schaik, "Modernism and Contemporaneity in Architecture: Peripheries and Centres," in *Non West Modernist Past*, eds. William Lim and Jiat-Hwee Chang (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2011), 53.

worked on a residential project for Singapore which was not realised. Following the Australian Government's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972 and the decision to establish diplomatic relations, Seidler had also travelled to China in 1976 and developed a proposal for the Australian Embassy in Peking.¹¹ Finally, in 1979 Seidler had submitted an unsuccessful proposal to the architectural competition for the HSBC Headquarters in Hong Kong. With the economic recession in Australia and the rise of Asian centres like Singapore and Hong Kong it is obvious that Seidler would have considered the opportunity to practice in Asia in a completely different light and welcomed such opportunities. Accordingly, when Hijjas approached Seidler in 1980 to collaborate on the project in Malaysia the opportunity was seized immediately.

Seen in this context of economic recession and a desire to look beyond the Australian borders, Seidler's engagement with Asia can be considered through Leon van Schaik's familiar but still thought-provoking redefinition of the "province/metropolis" binary. As originally proposed by van Schaik, these terms were to challenge the prejudicial interpretation of centres and peripheries based on geographical regions, and open up the possibilities of virtual and globally mobile centres for architectural discourse.¹² In a more recent publication van Schaik has furthered this proposition by claiming, "provinces" are "where our individual spatial thinking is forged by actualities of place and direct contact with peers," while "metropolises" are the "best possible arena for a conversation about our own work."¹³ Such an interpretation releases the provincial enterprise from the burden of being a mere derivative of the developments at the centre of discourse, and begins to recognise it as the original theatre of practice which informs the discussions in the metropolis. Accordingly, Seidler's experience in Asia can be interpreted as an attempt to engage in "spatial thinking . . . forged by actualities of place," while the regional centre in Sydney would continue to serve as the metropolis where Seidler would discuss and display these ideas, and seek recognition through media accolades and prizes.

A quick comparison of the Malaysia project with Seidler's two major high-rise commissions built subsequently, namely Grosvenor Place in Sydney (1982-87) and Shell Headquarters in Melbourne (1985-89), will show how the ideas developed for the Malaysia project came to inform Seidler's subsequent work



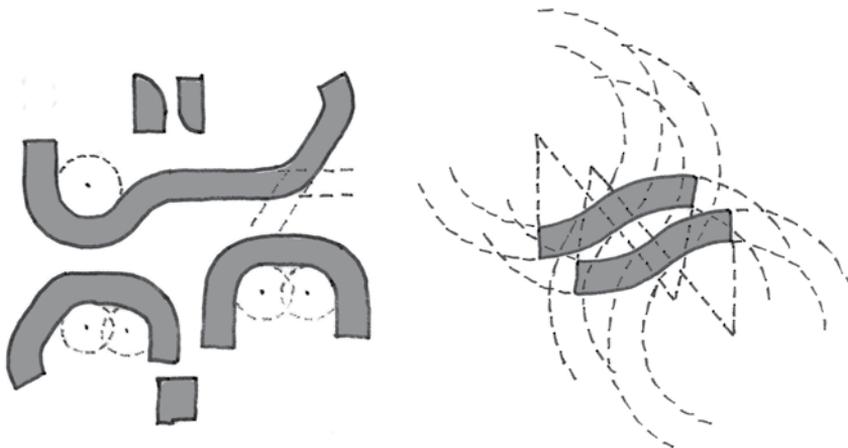
in Australia. The fact that both these projects were eventually recognised by prestigious national awards in 1991 furthers the province/metropolis argument where Asia becomes Seidler’s theatre for practice in the 1970s, the unrealised ideas from which will define his Australian authority in the 1990s.¹⁴ Indeed other un-built high-rises developed in the 1980s by Seidler, including the CRA Development 2 for Melbourne, the Circular Quay East Development for Sydney, the Casino and Hotel at Darling Harbour, and the Grand Central projects for Melbourne can also be seen as stemming from his experience in the Asian theatres of practice.

14. The Grosvenor Place in Sydney won the RAIAs Sir John Sulman Medal in 1991 and the Shell Headquarters in Melbourne won the RAIAs National Award in the same year.

The Birth of the Seidler “S” Profile

The first important contribution of the Seidler’s Asian experience is the development of the signature Seidler “S” curve. While Seidler had employed quadrant geometries in his work since the early 1970s, these were engaged as distinct sections of a toroid scattered about in the landscape. The Malaysia project saw these curves combined with counter curves to form elegant sinuous “S” profiles. Even when Seidler had experimented with joining curves and straight sections to make continuous lengths, such as in the un-built project for the Tuggeranong Offices or the competition entry for the Australian Parliament, these remained combinations of deep curves with low radius of curvature, where the centre of curvature was close to the building’s skin. Indeed earlier iterations of the Malaysia project dated May 1980 show a similar tendency (fig. 4). However, the subsequent development of the project led to the adoption of a spline-like

Figure 2. Development of the sinuous “S” curve: A comparison between the Tuggeranong Offices project (1974), and the Laylian Realty project in Malaysia (1981). Drawing by author. Adapted from Frampton and Drew, *Harry Seidler*.

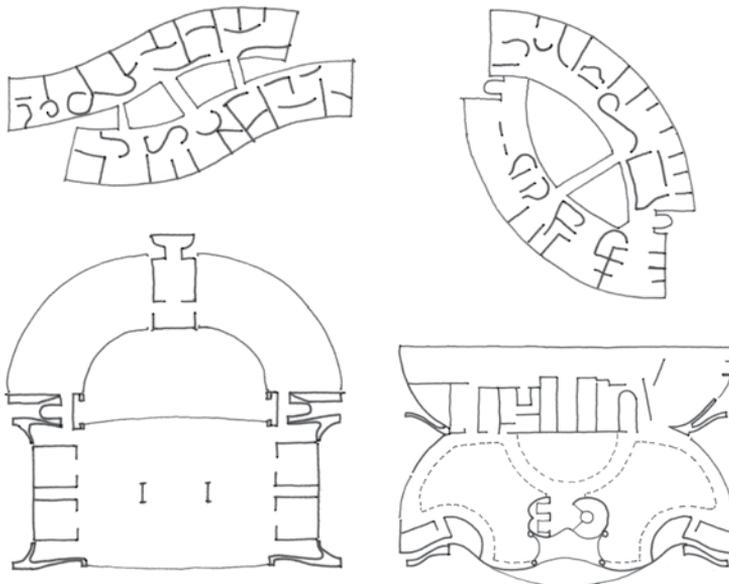


geometry that has since become synonymous with Seidler's work. The curve developed with the Malaysia project defines the low intensity winding geometries evident in the plan-form of award-winning projects like the Grosvenor Place and the Shell Headquarters, but also others like the CRA Development 2, the Circular Quay East Development, and the Casino and Hotel at Darling Harbour.

The Malaysia project was also pioneering in its use of free flowing curves within the building's interior. This project is the first instance for the appearance of an open office space divided by sinuous free standing walls. Archival sketches show a playful development of this pattern with instances of humorous sketches thrown in the margins.¹⁵ While Seidler's future use of such internal divisions was much restrained, the sub-divisions in Grosvenor place follow in a similar vein (fig. 3). Connections can also be made to the HSBC Club building that Seidler developed during the following year. The arguments for Baroque affinities in Seidler's later works often reference the Club project, which was an elaboration of the 1979 competition entry for the HSBC Headquarters. But is worth noting that while the 1979 competition entry introduced a slightly curved profile on the edges of the northern tower, the internal planning of the tower remained rectilinear, and the smaller southern buildings were developed as quadrants in plan (fig. 3). Months after working on the

15. Plan sketch on tracing paper, "Tube No: 225 - Laylian Realty Sdn Bhd Office Building, Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia," PXD 613, Harry Seidler Collection.

Figure 3. Development of the freeform interior layout: A comparison of the Malaysia Project (1981) with Grosvenor Place (1982), HSBC Headquarters competition entry (1979) and HSBC Club Building (1981). Drawing by author. Adapted from Harry Seidler Collection, and Frampton and Drew, *Harry Seidler*.

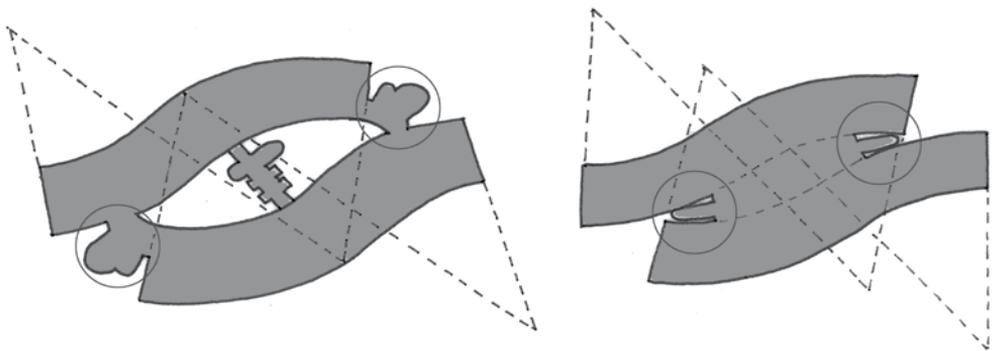


Malaysia project, when Seidler returned to the Hong Kong Club building, he embraced the curves in the internal planning of the building and truly developed the baroque-like plan elements (fig. 3). The ‘S’ curve geometry was further developed as a motif with another Asian project, the New World Apartments for Singapore (1981-82) and led to the identifiable balcony profiles associated with Seidler’s later residential projects like Hannes or Hamilton Houses, or the ones on the Horizon apartments in Darlinghurst that still define Sydney’s skyline.

The Genesis of a New Prototype

While the arguments for the origins of Seidler’s signature curves that defined his later career are important, the Malaysia project is also relevant for defining a change in his general approach to spatial planning in commercial high-rise with relation to the service core. When Seidler took on the Malaysia project he had only constructed two major high-rise projects, namely Australia Square and MLC Centre, both of which were developed as a unitary form plan with a single central core. Seidler’s 1979 entry for the HSBC Headquarters had seen him experiment with the separation of the lift core, placed on one end of the rectilinear form, from the service core on the other, but the proposal was not selected. The Malaysia project offers a new format where the two distinct geometric masses meant for office spaces were arranged at a slight shift so as to enclose an irregular shaped core. In the earlier iterations of this project, where the curve was too deep and left a significant gap between the built

Figure 4. Development of the enclosed core in the Malaysia Project: A comparison between the drawings of May 1980 and September 1981. Drawing by author. Adapted from Harry Seidler Collection.



masses, the central space was left open with a series of glass lifts while the service-cores were shifted to the ends where the curves met. However, as the curve was flattened and the spline geometry emerged, the slimmer interior gap was developed as a core. Whether the decision to incorporate the core in the gap prompted the birth of the curve or vice-versa is not essential. What is important to note is that this formal experimentation set a new parti that Seidler subsequently repeated in his award winning design for the Grosvenor Place, and other un-built projects.

The Grosvenor Place project is discussed in a recent publication by Gevork Hartoonian where Hartoonian claims that the “composition follows the planimetric organisation of Seidler’s design for the Australian Embassy, Paris,” and further argues that the location of the service core at the centre of the two quadrants and two fire exit stairwells connecting the two quadrants are derivative of Josef Albers’s work.¹⁶ The comparison to Josef Albers is not novel and Kenneth Frampton makes an allusion to this pedigree in the 1992 monograph.¹⁷ However, Hartoonian extends this argument through a discussion of “Graphic Tectonics” in Albers works and claims that Albers’s “Two Centres” series was “instrumental” in the planimetric organisation of the Grosvenor Place tower.¹⁸ Viewed in the context of the Malaysian project, the allusion to Seidler’s previous work or indeed his graduate training with Albers becomes tenuous. The distinctly separate geometries of the two curves of the Paris Embassy project look outwards and do not attempt to enclose any space, let alone a shared core (fig. 5). The transformation of the core in the Malaysia project, on the other hand, clearly indicates a moment of transition immediately preceding the Grosvenor project. The reorganisation of the quadrants to enclose the core in the centre is a distinctly different move in planimetric organisation, which in light of the Malaysia project cannot be traced back to Seidler’s work on the Paris Embassy.

As Kenneth Frampton has already noted, the Malaysia project served as a “basic prototype for a new generation of medium to high-rise commercial structures.”¹⁹ The above discussion regarding the genesis of the sinuous “S” profile and the development of a new parti for the organisation of the core helps illustrate the value of this project as a source of new ideas that defined Seidler’s subsequent work, and consequently the

16. Gevork Hartoonian, “Harry Seidler: Revisiting Modernism,” *Fabrications* 20 no. 1 (2011): 42.

17. Frampton and Drew, *Harry Seidler*.

18. Hartoonian, “Harry Seidler,” 30-53.

19. Frampton and Drew, *Harry Seidler*, 96.



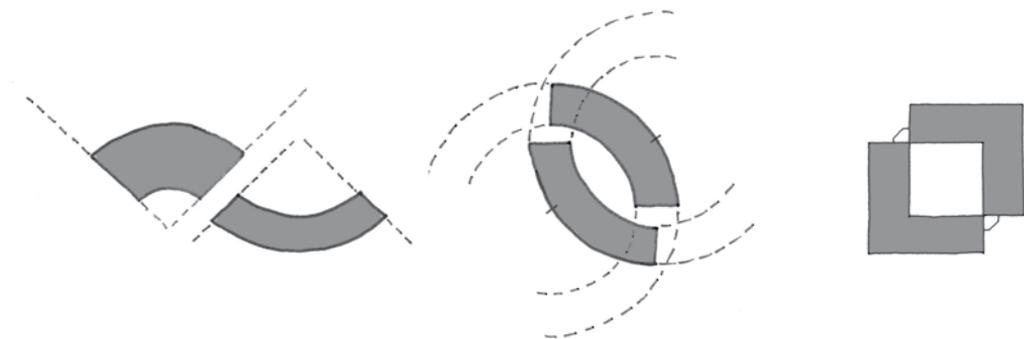
advancement of modern architecture. The use of the province/metropolis framework has allowed us to go beyond the limits of the centre/periphery model—and possibly even Frampton’s position, which treats this project as an “interlude”—by acknowledging the possibility that works done in the Asian provinces could still be used to explain the development of modernism in the Western metropolises. However, such an application of the province/metropolis model nevertheless relies on the agency of Harry Seidler as conducting important experiments within the relatively remote context of Asia to forge his “individual spatial thinking” before bringing it back to the centre of debate in Sydney, and thus cannot fully acknowledge the collaborative nature of the project.²⁰ Yet another interpretation is possible, where the “metropole” is recognised as an arena of debate in which new ideas emerge, while “provinces” serve the propagation of these ideas through established institutional means. Within such a context, the possibility of a bilateral exchange between Seidler and Hijjas might point towards an emerging condition of Asian metropolises and Western provinces.

20. It is worth pointing out here that while Frampton did recognise the importance of the project he did not acknowledge its collaborative nature.

Collaboration as Bilateral Exchange

It is worth noting that in 1979, just before he contacted Seidler, Hijjas had won the Menara Maybank competition using a similar parti as the one discussed above. The outline of Hijjas’s plan is clearly rectilinear and uses overlapping squares rather than curves to generate its final form. But the final configuration of opposing “L” shapes with the core lodged in the middle is evidently closer to the Grosvenor Place solution than Seidler’s Paris Embassy project (fig. 5). Furthermore, the fire exit staircase as a hanging detail on the meeting point of the opposing forms as used by Seidler in Grosvenor Place is also

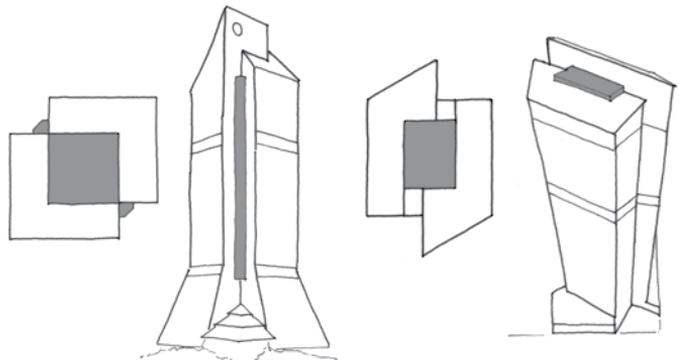
Figure 5. Origins of the opposing geometries of the Grosvenor Place (middle): A comparison with Seidler’s Paris Embassy (left) and Hijjas’s Menara Maybank (right). Drawing by author. Adapted from Frampton and Drew, *Harry Seidler*, and images courtesy of Hijjas Kasturi Associates.



present in Hijjas's work. Here the two opposing "L" shapes form a corner that is accentuated in the overall form through a projecting fire escape staircase several storeys up in the air. It is arguable, then, that these ideas were Hijjas's contribution to the Malaysia project which were reworked and developed further with the help of Seidler, thereby becoming a part of Seidler's design process for the Grosvenor Place project. The nature of the collaboration makes it difficult to argue for specific origins, but at the least this brings the idea of a unilateral transfer into question. In any case, it is undeniable that such an argument for collaboration and bilateral exchange with the Malaysia project of 1980-82 forms a much better explanation of Seidler's work at Grosvenor place, which started immediately afterwards (1982-87), than has been offered in recent literature.

The fact that the parti of the central core surrounded by two distinct masses was not just a reactionary carryover and remained in Seidler's imagination is also evident from his designs for the Grand Central Project in Melbourne first developed in 1988. The first iteration for this project was a direct derivative of the Malaysia project, using the exact same plan form to propose a taller version of the Malaysian tower. What is of greater interest is the second variation that Seidler developed for the Grand Central project in 1989 (fig. 6). Abandoning his signature curves, Seidler instead opted for a rectilinear form reminiscent of the Menara Maybank. Indeed the construction of Menara Maybank had recently been completed and it is arguable that Seidler would have seen the value of the project in a new light. Other aspects of the Grand Central Project including its asymmetrical entrance canopy are also reminiscent of the Menara Maybank project. The purpose of this comparison is not to argue for a direct tendency to copy Hijjas, and indeed the completed Maybank project would have benefitted from Seidler's

Figure 6. The enduring impact of the Malaysian experience: A comparison of Hijjas's Menara Maybank (1987) on the left, with Seidler's Grand Central Project (1989) on the right. Drawing by author. Adapted from images courtesy of Hijjas Kasturi Associates and Frampton and Drew, Harry Seidler.



insights shared with Hijjas during their collaborative period, but to establish that the Malaysia project was not an ‘interlude’ and that the Asian experience was just as important in defining Seidler’s future practice as it was for Hijjas.

These revelations about the possibility of a reciprocal impact on Seidler originating from Hijjas’s contribution to the collaborative effort present a different picture of exchange. The difficulty in arguing this position of a true bilateral exchange highlights the on-going prejudice within which the historiography of modern architecture in Asia is constructed. Therefore, in order to truly acknowledge the possibility of a bilateral exchange and regard the actual contribution of the work of Asian architects, we need to discard these conceptual frames and rethink the context of exchange outside of the hegemonic divides between Asia and the West.

Opening the Canon

This investigation into the context of collaboration between Australian architect Harry Seidler and Malaysian architect Hijjas Kasturi has worked to reveal the limits of current frameworks within which the history of modern architecture is constructed. The frameworks of investigation that continue to perpetuate the rhetoric of Cold War era technical exchange can only interpret such an instance of collaboration between an Australian and Asian architect through a centre/periphery model, where the agency of the Asian architect relegated to the peripheries is limited to developing a derivative style inspired by the glimpses of the centre, albeit a regional centre as in the case of Australia. While certain other frameworks, such as the province/metropolis model explored here, help transcend this problem of geographical centres and peripheries, a historical case based in the Cold War period continues to be interpreted in a manner that limits the agency of the Asian architect, and extends the problem identified in the argument for a unilateral technical exchange. Since the Asian architect rarely finds himself/herself at the centre of discourse in the Western metropolis, the Western agent will continue to be recognised as the source of innovation and expertise. Indeed, the only way to overcome this prejudicial approach to writing the history of modern architecture is to open the canon of modernism itself and engage the possibility of multilateral transfers.

Here, the current study proffers a possible direction, and the context of the 1970s introduced above is a crucial element to consider. By the mid-1970s Australia was in a deep economic

21. Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

recession which would only be overcome after the economic reforms of 1983 under Bob Hawke. This condition is not unique to Australia and the impact of the oil crisis and the fall in economic growth rates had left most Western nations in an economic recession, where the combination of inflation and unemployment had led to a period defined by economists as stagflation.²¹ On the other hand, export-driven economic development in Asia had transformed the context of urbanisation in Asian cities, which were actively pursuing architectural projects. It is worth considering that this global shift in economic power had consequences for the shift in centre of the architectural debate as well. So, as a point of departure, the historiography of modern architecture could rethink the developments of the late 20th century by acknowledging the 1970s as a time when Asian “metropolises” potentially developed and guided the course of architectural modernism, nevertheless through established institutional frameworks based in Western “provinces.”

