

## Post Zen Depression

By Made Wijaya

**Doomed to fall? Our Frequent Flyer takes a stroll through the gardens of Asia's Edens and finds the serpent offering up the beige lychee of minimalism by numbers. Repent, ye sinners.**



I am tired of advertisements for ugly villas. One can't open an inflight magazine these days without finding its pages littered with hard sell campaigns for Zen-style McMansions. I know it's none of my business if the world's most gorgeous cultures want to turn themselves into Florida; it's just that the treeless, birdless, godless look of these formulaic villas gets on my nerves. The "walled crematorium with one temple tree look" has now spread across the equator, to the Pacific Islands and the Caribbean!

South Asian holiday homes used to be 'one-offs' (wildly original): now they are 'one-OFs.' They seem to be built from a kit that includes pared down pavilions in the Bali modern style, a rectangular plunge pool, 10 square metres of timber slats (applied horizontally or vertically to any surface), 10 running metres of homogenous planting (horse tail, bullrush, or any other plant that looks machine-made) and a scatter-Buddha (Eastern landscape-design's answer to the scatter cushion) facing a U-section water-spout mounted on a black feature wall.

The newly emerging real estate empires now have their own magazines, which are generally stuffed with advertising of the "You too can live like a king on Bali, the Island of the Gods" variety; someone in Bali recently sent me a glossy new *Exotiq* in-house real estate magazine. Despite its name, it is a catalogue of rather drab villas, interspersed with examples

of White Supremacist style advertising so popular on the island these days.

One ad says "Buy a Villa and help a class of Balinese students ... so they don't need to work in rice-fields, perpetuating the family's poverty." The nice people at Exotiq, arguably the island's most professional real estate company, mean well. They do not really mean to re-style Bali as a rich man's Biafra: they just haven't bothered to notice that Balinese children have been merrily working the rice fields with their fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts for 2,000 years. It is not 'Blood Diamonds up the Mekong' boss!

Imagine if Balinese families went to Texas and bought up strips of property in the middle of the wheat fields and built gin-palaces and then took out ads saying "Buy a villa in Texas and help keep the youth of America off crack cocaine."

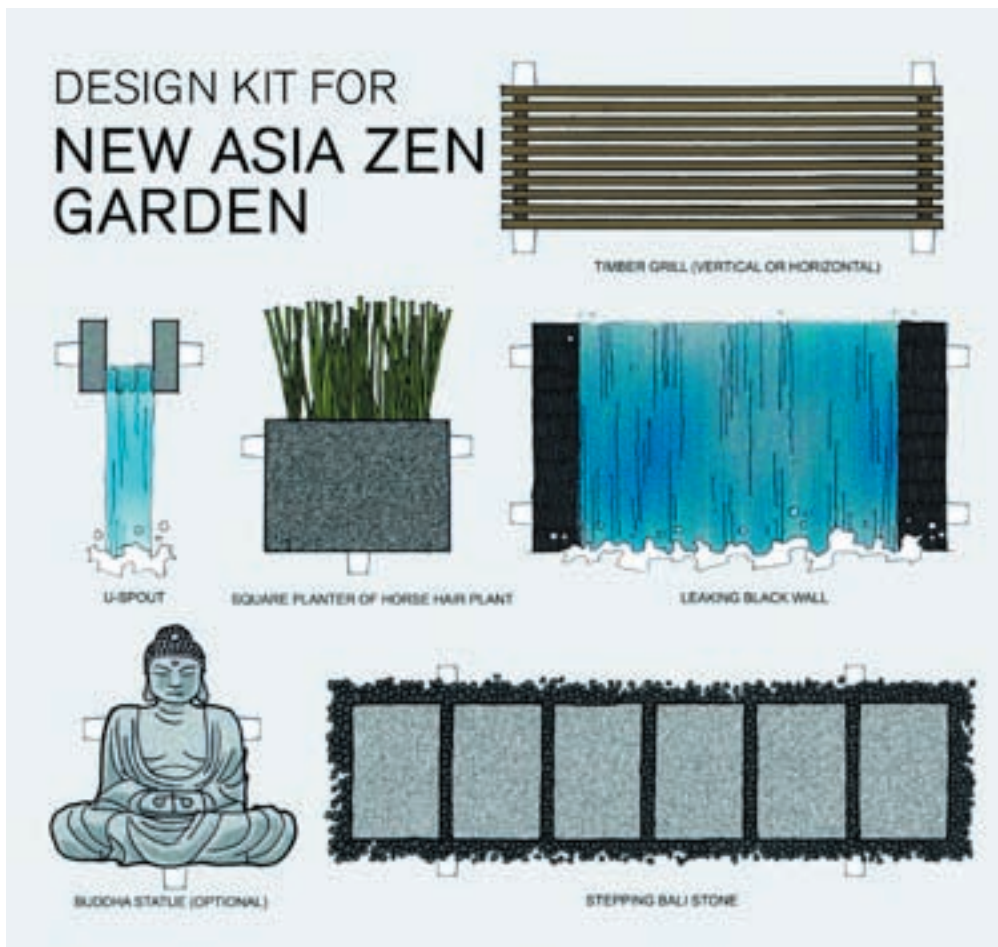
### The emergence of a Non-Asian Style

I was there with front row seats at the birth of 'New Asia' - I was working on the garden design for the venerable Institute of South East Asia Studies in Singapore in 1990 when I first heard the phrase "too representational" chorused by client and architect alike. It means any design component that is culturally referenced, or romantic, or 'spooky looking', i.e. Indian.

In the same week, the Singapore Tourism Department invented the notion of a 'New Asia', an urban Asia if you will, of less animistically-inclined, less representational residents. The University of Singapore, Faculty of Architecture soon followed suit by firing most of its historians and its experts on traditional architecture, in favour of minimalist modernists.

A homogenised New Asian architectural style was born. The influence spread up the Peninsula to Malaysia where the new filleted style was championed as "Islam-friendly." New Asia's brown and white palette was 'safe' - no Hindu or Malay colour getting on the way. In nearby Bali, the home of many seminal, traditional-modern, architectural masterpieces - the Bali Oberoi, the Amandari and the Alila Manggis

*Continued overleaf.*



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- hotels and homes based on traditional architecture were pronounced 'old hat' or, even worse, were said to 'reinforce cultural stereotypes!'

The cry to modernise went out and the "Zen" explosion started, championed by talented Singapore and Malaysian architects. But true Zen, that elite sect of Japanese Buddhism - famous for its stark, surreal, supernatural gardens - was being bastardised and served up as Zen-wannabe (the sound of one aluminium slash window closing).

After the monetary crisis of 1999, the carpetbaggers moved into South East Asia, quickly followed by battalions of Zen warriors in Kuta Prada; *A Zen Touch for your Maid's Bathroom* was the bestseller at the Bangkok airport last year; *Asian Men's Spa* magazine launched its scratch and smell nothing scent. A generation of artful-natural garden designers and contractors were mothballed, to await a Post-Zen revival.

Amazingly, as I'm writing this, I find an article by Liam Fitzpatrick in the latest *Time* magazine, entitled "Vive la Difference". In his article Fitzpatrick bemoans the recent

trend in boutique hotel design.

"Your room will look as if it were put together by Balinese decorator after a long day brainstorming with brand managers from Body Shop," he writes. (The added tragedy here is that Fitzpatrick is not referring to Balinese who decorate but to the new wave of anally-inclined Zen-warrior decorators from Brisbane, Berlin and Baltimore).

"You might have thought that travel publishers and style professionals would be thunderous in their denouncement of such conformity," Fitzpatrick continues, "but they are its ideologues". One book, *Asian Chic* (Taschen, 2003) did highlight the region's diversity, but it was lost in a sea of mediocre minimalism.

Let's all gather behind Fitzpatrick's brave call to arms, I say! Let us not accept blunt buffs of bulrush, where gorgeous gorms of gladiolus once reigned. Stand up and be counted, colorists! Fight them on the benches, Pilates-puralists! Get your ya-yas out, for God, who loves colour and movement, and all things bright and beautiful in the garden. Amen. 🌀