

## Nearness for the Rich: The Case of Adrian Zecha

PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN IN WAR SAY that the smell of decomposing flesh is overpoweringly sweet. I have never experienced that smell, nor can I quite imagine it, but it is what comes to mind upon entering the lobby of the Mandarin Hotel on Jalan Thamrin in Jakarta. Clouds of smoke from clove flavored cigarettes are stirred with the evaporates from bodies entering the frigid lobby from the sweltering outside, mixed with the off-gassed fumes of adhesives and synthetic materials, and then recycled ten thousand times through the air conditioning. They don't let much outside air into the system because it is so polluted that on most days the buildings across the street are fuzzy blurs by mid-afternoon. The Mandarin is about fifty stories high as are many of the buildings that bear the names of Western and Japanese corporations along Jalan Thamrin.

Behind Jalan Thamrin on both sides stretches a one- and two-story city fabric of ungraspable dimensions that houses 16 million people. In the lobby of the Mandarin, there is a disco, forlorn at all hours, with spots of colored light reflected from the mirror chandelier racing endless laps around the floor. There are usually a couple of Japanese salary men hanging around, looking for one of the mangy prostitutes who wander in occasionally. There is also a "trattoria," which features "Northern Italian Cuisine" that turns the food in your freshman dorm into a fond memory. This is the apogee of "globalizing modernity," Rem Koolhaas's spiritual home.

If you are leaving the Mandarin and your journey is more than a few feet, you have to take a taxi, because at most times of day it is physically impossible to cross Jalan Thamrin on foot. To travel the six blocks to the train station takes close to an hour, an hour spent breathing the fumes of bajis, nasty little vehicles powered by two-stroke engines that each emit about as much pollution as a coal-fired electric generating plant.

Imagine that journey, then a numb, sweaty, two-hour train ride to the town of Bandung, then an equally numb and disorienting twilight taxi ride before being deposited in the forecourt of a beautiful new building—a stone-paved court ringed with trees, a thick ochre wall with deep openings and no glass in them. You walk through a passage with no doors and are inside, sort of.

A sublime young lady, demurely wrapped in batik from neck to ankles, hands you a thick iced goblet of delicious fruit juice. There are no living creatures on earth—no fish, no tropical birds, no antelopes, no jungle cats—more graceful and elegant than the young women you see from time to time in Indonesia. On one side of the room, perched on a big pillow, a boy almost as

delicate as the fruit juice girl is playing a wooden flute. The flute music mixes with the rustle of trees moving softly in the evening air just outside. On the other side of this semi-outdoor room is a terrace, then a canyon with tall trees reaching from the canyon floor to eye level. Small white birds swirl in the treetops, barely visible in the dim light.

This world and the world of two and a half hours ago cannot both be real. One thinks of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu who could not decide whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. That world, the one left behind, is what we are told is inevitable, the product of inexorable technologies and economic forces we cannot control. This world, this paradise we have been transported to, is the creation of a Hong Kong entrepreneur named Adrian Zecha.

Zecha and now a few other developers of resorts and hotels in Southeast Asia have discovered the obvious: that the indigenous cultures of Java, Bali, Malaysia, and Thailand include traditions of building, craft, and cuisine that are beautiful and fascinating to travelers from all over the world. Zecha's Chedi Hotel in Bandung, described above, is one of his lesser, middle-priced ventures, yet it is exquisite in every detail—the stoneware jars that hold shampoo, the muslin laundry bag, the little straw trays for tea, the room of lattice screens, the breezy, naturally ventilated building, the gardens, the site itself - all real stuff, all gorgeous, all done without a hint of kitsch. This is not Trader Vic's.

Zecha has a small stable of architects that includes Kerry Hill of Singapore, Ed Tuttle of Paris, and Australian Peter Muller. They are all more or less modern architects; at least they have absorbed and incorporated the lessons of many of the best modernists and the great "pre-moderns," from Frank Lloyd Wright and Eliel Saarinen (again, not Eero) to Luis Barragan and Rafael Moneo. Their projects include some of the world's most luxurious places, the glorious Aman-dari and Amanusa Hotels in Bali among them.

So what is the lesson here? One could say that it is the old story of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement all over again: Rich people, and rich people only, can afford nice stuff that is made in ways that have integrity and quality. But the interesting story about Adrian Zecha is what he perceives about people's aspirations, what he knows about people's dreams. Certainly not everything about the environments he creates is expensive to produce, and much of their appeal comes from materials and practices that are totally straightforward and simple. But there is something eternal and strangely familiar about these paradisiacal constructs. We somehow know that they are the way things should be. In them, we feel we have returned to an ancestral place that we have not seen since childhood. They drive home the truth that there is something biological in our responses to places like these and that the lobby of the Jakarta Mandarin Hotel rubs our genetic codes in all the ways they don't want to be rubbed.

