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INTERIORS ARCHITECTURE DESIGN

PUBLIC HOUSING FUTURES

SKYVILLE @ DAWSON BY WOHA | NOW 26 BY ARCHITECTKIDD | KAY NGEE TAN ARCHITECTS
M SOCIAL BY PHILIPPE STARCK, ONG&ONG AND AXIS ARCHITECTS PLANNERS | JUN ONG



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IT IS TELLING THAT THE FIRST TOPIC DISCUSSED by Kay Ngee Tan during our initial meeting was books – or rather, the business of selling books and the intricacies of designing bookstores. The Tan family (specifically, Kay Ngee's brother Mark) is behind the well known Singapore-based book publishing and retailing company Page One. Tan explains in measured detail the genesis of the company in his own reading habits as a university student, and the coming together of Page One and Kinokuniya for the latter's first retail presence in Singapore in the 1990s.

Tan designed the well-known Kinokuniya space in Ngee Ann City with a keen concern for the culture of bookstores. He explains, "We analysed the functionality of a bookshop, and asked ourselves: What is a bookshelf? What is a circulation pattern? And what is a bookish environment?" The ends of bookshelves were treated with folded profiles inspired by the Japanese *yukata* robe, the plan was tilted to an angle of 45 degrees around the escalator core to encourage a steady flow of foot traffic and eliminate dead corners, and natural light and tree views were welcomed through Ngee Ann City's large windows. "When customers look at a book," he says, "they can relate to the outside world. And the world of books begins to relate to the environment of the bookstore."

Tan, who is also a writer, has since designed many stores for Kinokuniya throughout Asia, the Middle East and in the USA, as well as several for Page One. The presence of numerous books in his Duxton Hill studio – itself resonating a calming aura augmented by high ceilings, a substantial use of timber and a classical music soundtrack – naturally lends itself to a conversation about whether there is a literary influence on Tan's architecture.

I begin to discover that his work is the result of a process as exploratory in its basis as the preparation of a literary work. Similar investigative approaches and 'design' techniques are evident – researching the subject through multiple frames of reference,



THINKING, WRITING, DRAWING

AN EXPLORATORY PROCESS AKIN TO THE PREPARATION OF A LITERARY WORK STEERS THE ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE OF KAY NGEETAN, ARCHITECT AND WRITER.

Left: Kay Ngee Tan in his Singapore studio. Tan was selected as one of the '581 Architects in the World' by Gallery Ma (Tokyo) in 1996

Top right: A double-volume meeting room sits adjacent to a model-making area (not shown) just inside the entrance to Kay Ngee Tan Architects' Singapore office

Middle right: Tan's love for books is evident in his Singapore office, where timber shelves, cupboards, tables and benches establish a soothing backdrop

Bottom right: Architectural models are displayed throughout the Duxton Hill office, which occupies a pair of conservation shophouses

analysing the findings, conceptualising on the basis of matters known and insights gained, forging a response, seeking new meanings along the way, refining and clarifying with intricacies, and finally, reflecting and adding to one's mental store for future reference. It is a process of creating the conditions for organisational and formal explorations – a base 'positioning' for a project that will allow for the emergence of conceptual threads during the course of its development.

Not surprisingly, Tan's is a portfolio that refutes stylistic generalisations. It includes the culturally nuanced Sultan Hotel – a conservation work with a highly sensitive consideration of the pedestrian flows of its urban context and the life that pulses through the site; the intricately crafted Garden House – where natural materials such as Turkish stone and Japanese reeds are composed in a pavilion-like form that merges with its garden context; and the headquarters building for the BreadTalk Group – a futuristic stack of sweeping architectural strata. In each instance, the form and style of the architecture is specific to the particular needs and context of the project.

Tan began his architectural education at the National University of Singapore in 1977, and graduated from the Architectural Association (AA) in London in 1984. A love of literature and a craving for knowledge was already evident during his time at NUS, when he established a rapport with Page One staff. "Whenever they received a new shipment of books, they would kindly call me and I would go and browse the warehouse. I'd select whatever I'd like to read and bring it home. I would also request books they didn't have, and they would bring them in. A lot of them were bestsellers." Tan would later design several stores for the family company – in Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore (at VivoCity).

The AA, says Tan, encouraged its students to get to the root of issues – "the 'root' meaning that if something doesn't belong to the project you're working on, no matter how you 'glue' it, it will fall off. It was never just about the architectural product; it was whether or not the architecture was suitable for that site and that identity," he



Top left: The Check House | (completed in 1994, KNTA Architects) was an early project, and represented a bold new direction in residential design in Singapore. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Top right: The Singapore Management University campus (completed in 2000, KNTA Architects) incorporates a bulbous lecture room undercroft that has become a popular sitting area

Bottom: Tan leases a small plot of land behind his studio from the Singapore Land Authority and uses it as a test garden for local plant species



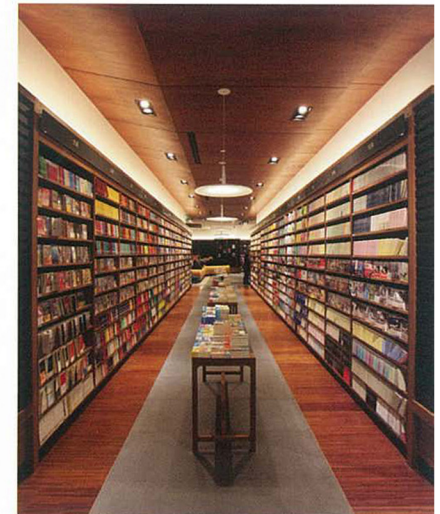
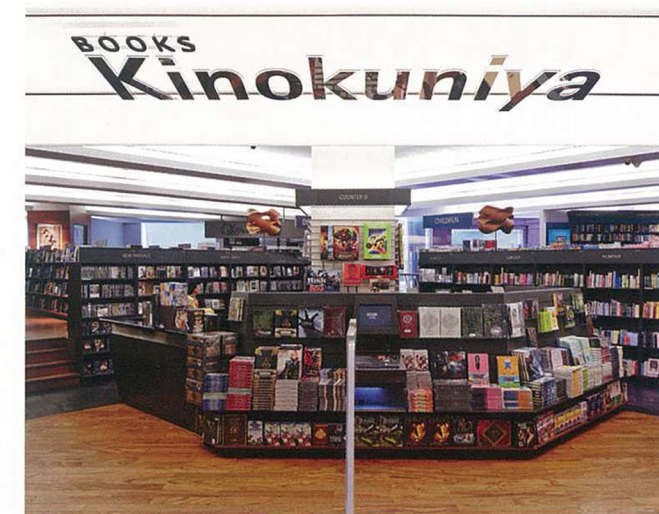
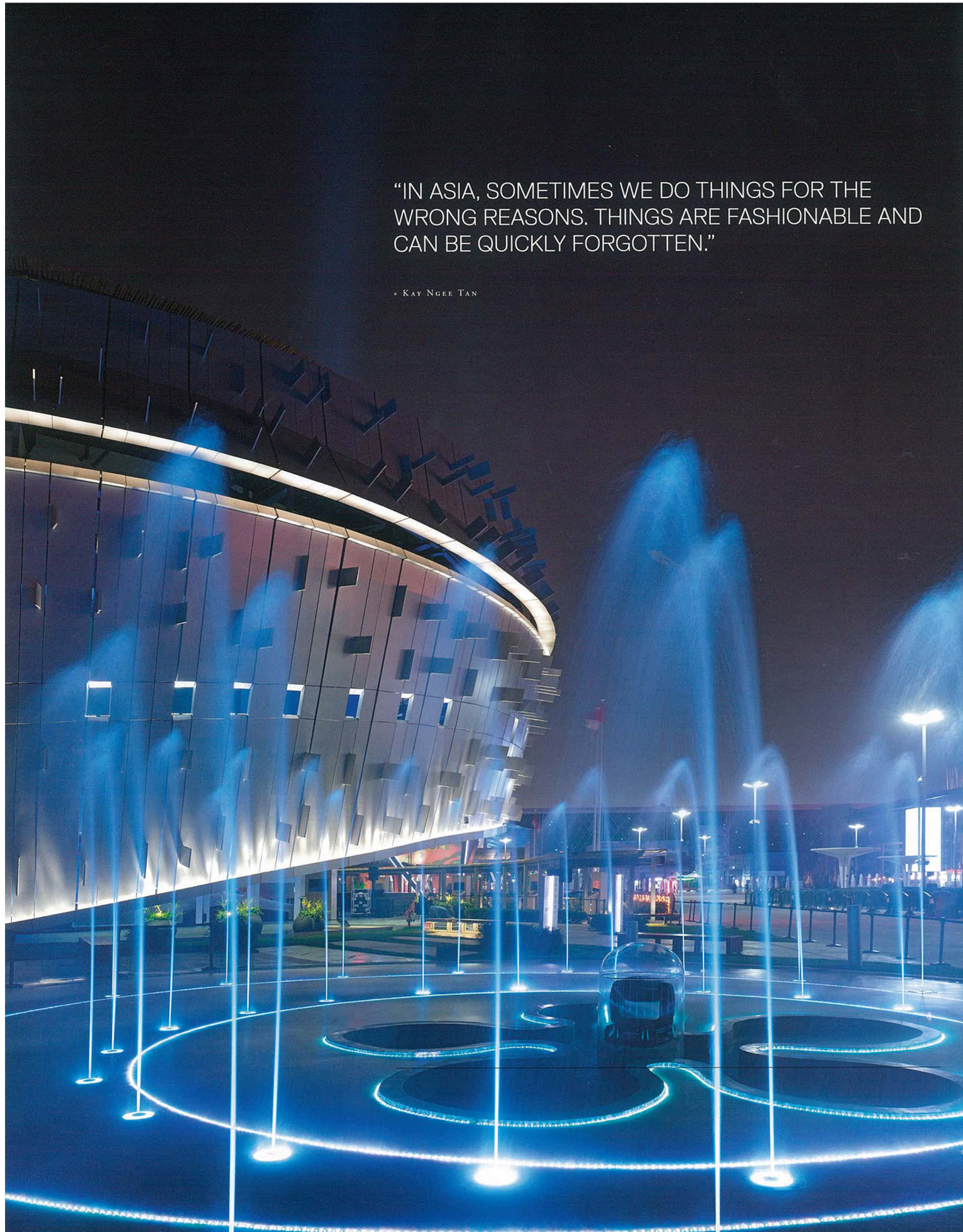
"IT WAS NEVER JUST ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCT; IT WAS WHETHER OR NOT THE ARCHITECTURE WAS SUITABLE FOR THAT SITE AND THAT IDENTITY."

• KAY NGEETAN

Above: Tan's villa (completed in 2002) for the 'Commune by the Great Wall' development is one of a number that provide a boutique hotel experience in a serene landscape

"IN ASIA, SOMETIMES WE DO THINGS FOR THE WRONG REASONS. THINGS ARE FASHIONABLE AND CAN BE QUICKLY FORGOTTEN."

* KAY N GEE TAN



Left: The Singapore Pavilion at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai (completed in 2010) addressed the theme 'Urban Symphony'. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Top left: The form of the Singapore Pavilion was inspired by a music box, in particular the rotating metal cylinder within. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Bottom left: The interior of the original Kinokuniya store at Ngee Ann City (completed in 1999, KNTA Architects) made use of design elements inspired by Japanese culture. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Bottom right: The interior of the Kinokuniya store at EmQuartier in Bangkok (completed in 2015) references the layering quality that can be found in Thai architecture



explains. The process of looking for clues from the environment of the site and from the culture in which the project sits remains with Tan to this day.

His architectural career began in London, where, after graduating, he worked for Arup Associates until 1990. He credits his years at Arup as having provided him with a thorough understanding of technical factors. "Arup has some of the best engineers," he says. "When I was working there in the '80s, before all the talk about environmental issues, Arup was focusing on the more intangible elements of architecture," he adds. The lessons he learned there would inform aspects of his own later work – for example, in terms of a sensitivity to how air conditioning could gently and indirectly wash over the body of the book-browsing customer in a Kinokuniya store, or how the lighting could provide a wash of background illumination as opposed to creating glare on book covers or harsh shadows.

He set up Kay Ngee Tan Architects in London in 1990, turning a run-down upholstery workshop into his studio in 1992 with a major renovation. He mixed practice with teaching at The Bartlett School of Architecture (University College London) between 1990 and 1993. KNTA Architects was

established in the early 1990s in Singapore with Tan Teck Kiam. The current Singapore office, Kay Ngee Tan Architects, was established in 2003 – a serene, timber-clad environment within two adjacent shophouses at Duxton Hill. In the early years, the space played host to exhibitions of the work of local photographers, organised by Tan and his photographer friend Tay Kay Chin. Now, a focal point is the small garden behind the studio – a plot that Tan leases from the Singapore Land Authority to test and observe the growth and behaviour of local plant species.

As the UK entered a recession period, Tan teamed up with Bekir Kaya, a British/Turkish hotelier who had been living in London. They pooled their savings and set up a multi-faceted company in Istanbul in 2003 by the name of Kaya on Coast (pun intended). They became their own client, acquiring and renovating small properties, then running a variety of businesses (including serviced apartments and a restaurant) within these buildings. Tan's interest in Turkey lies principally in its Ottoman-era and neo-classical architecture. "It's beautiful," he says. "And there's a consensus about keeping the old fabric of the city intact. No one would consider tearing down a dilapidated building; it would be brought back to its original form. I respect that and I like to be part of it."

He travels to Europe every few weeks, depending on the jobs at hand, and is currently teaching as a guest critic at the Istanbul Technical University. He moves his staff between the three studios to support projects as needed, and, at times, simply to brainstorm and seek inspiration. He prefers this arrangement over the situation of 'the tail wagging the dog' – when staff numbers dictate that the practice needs to take on projects of a certain size. Reducing the size of the team was a firm decision with his then partner Tan Teck Kiam of KNTA Architects, after the completion of what has perhaps been the largest project locally to date – the master planning and architecture of the Singapore Management University (SMU). "I keep a tight team now, and don't take on more projects than I can personally be involved in," he says, adding that he places a great deal of trust in his four associates.

The SMU's Victoria Street campus was the subject of an international design competition, entered by KNTA Architects in collaboration with Edward Cullinan Architects UK and Grant Associates as the landscape designer in 2000. Subsequently, the project was completed by the KNTA Architects team with Cicada as landscape designer. When discussing the project, Tan mentions elements such as harpsichord-like frames that the team prototyped for the curved facade



"WHAT IS A BOOKSHELF? WHAT IS A CIRCULATION PATTERN? AND WHAT IS A BOOKISH ENVIRONMENT?"

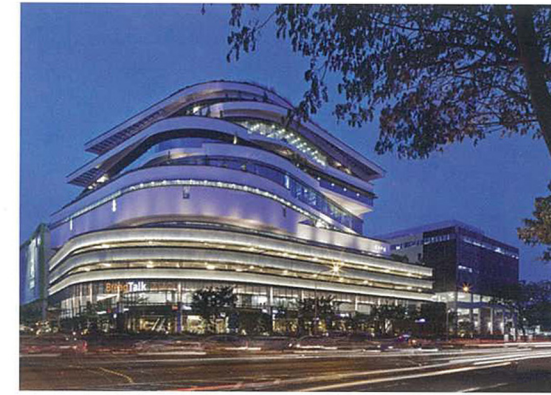
— KAY NGEETAN



Opposite: The Page One bookstore at VivoCity (completed in 2006) referenced the amorphous building in which it sat, and its seaside context. Photo by Tay Kay Chin

Top: The Sultan Hotel (completed in 2011) is situated within ten conserved shophouses in the historic Kampong Glam area. Photo by Jeremy San

Bottom: A bridge over a pedestrian thoroughfare at the Sultan Hotel emphasises the connections with the urban surrounds. Photo by Jeremy San



creepers (a complement to the flowing and open physical environment of the campus) and the development of a bulbous lecture room undercroft that gestures toward the National Museum of Singapore (which was being redeveloped at the time of construction).

A sense of the layering of concept, form and gesture arises again as we discuss the recently completed headquarters for the Select Group – a Singapore-based restaurant chain and food service provider. There, the architecture is an expression of two distinct blocks – a glass and aluminium volume housing the office, showroom and a culinary school, and an evocative wing inspired by the traditional dim sum basket. “The central kitchen demands fresh-air intake and the expulsion of steam, but the typical grilles can be very unsightly. We decided to use ceramic tiles – something organic rather than artificial,” Tan explains. The tiles were custom made by Taiwanese ceramic artist Hsu Yung Hsu, and being opaque, allow for better control of the amount of light and heat entering the workspace. A roof deck unites the two volumes and carves into the glazed block with dramatic curves.

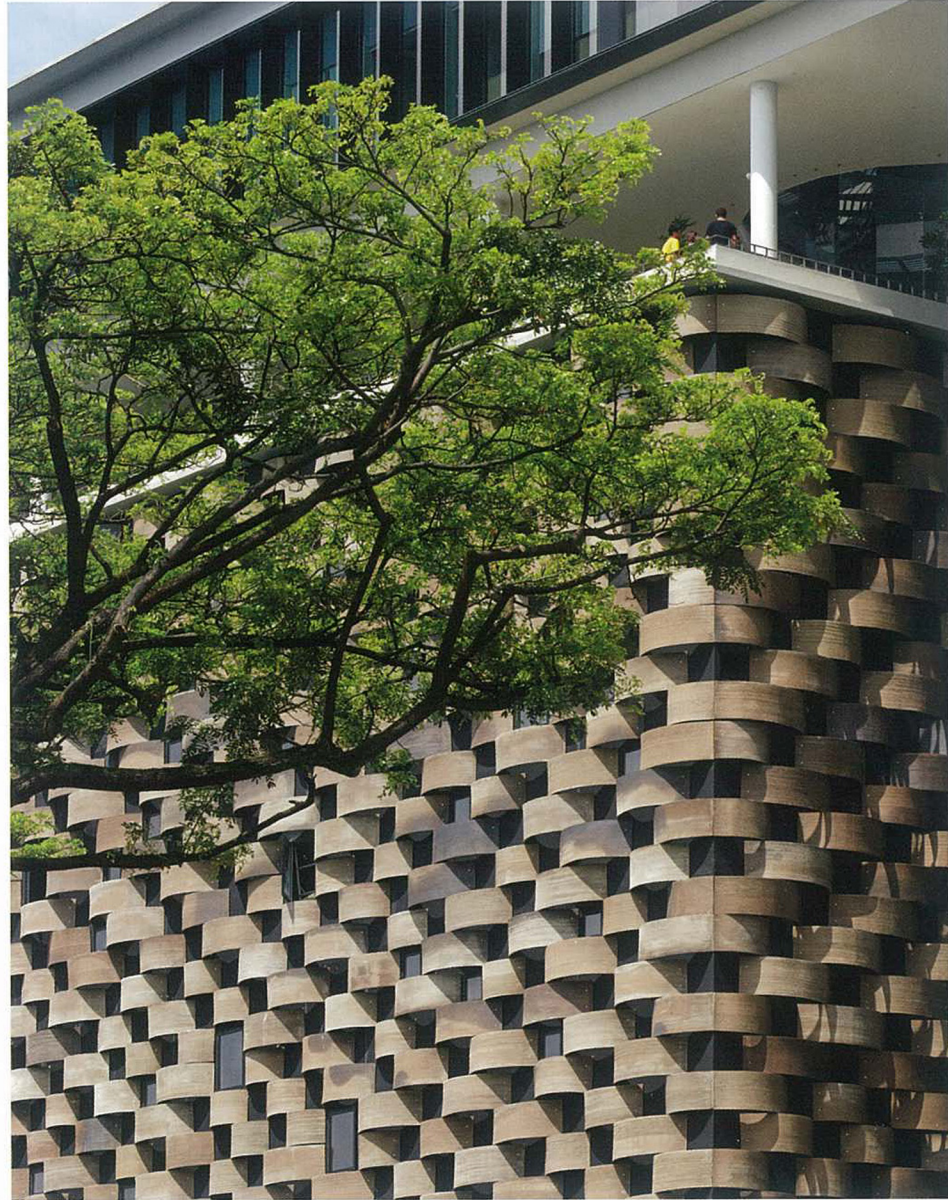
A more direct metaphor was applied for a temporary building – the Singapore Pavilion for the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. For this theatrical and heavily trafficked context, Tan turned to the power of a recognisable form – the music box – to represent the symphony of cultures that compose our city state. He extracted and recomposed a familiar form at the heart of the music box: the rotating metal cylinder and its

Opposite: The Peirce Hill House (completed in 2014) draws on the aesthetic of traditional Chinese architecture. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Top left: For the BreadTalk Headquarters in Tai Seng (completed in 2013), design cues were taken from the idea of dough being layered by a baker. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Top right: At the Garden House (completed in 2013), a new pavilion-like block was developed beside an existing house and a verdant garden. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Bottom: An internal courtyard at the BreadTalk Headquarters introduces greenery and light to a staff dining area. Photo by Dennis Gilbert



armature of pins. These became a taut and recognisable container for a melange of displays within.

Tan has been supplementing, or perhaps informing, his architectural work for many years with his writing on arts, culture and cities. He has published three books, the most recent of which was *Magnetic Fields of Cities*. It was chosen by *Yazhou Zhoukan* (*Asia Newsweekly*) as one of the 'Ten Best Books in the Chinese Language' in 2008, making Tan the first Singaporean to receive the honour in the non-fiction category. Since autumn 2015, he has been writing a fortnightly column for the Hong-Kong-published *Yazhou Zhoukan* on the broad theme of 'Cities and Aesthetics'. He leafs through a booklet of his articles; they discuss the transformation of Singapore and Shanghai, the Istanbul Biennial, the architecture of a Japanese museum, Chinese tourists in Japan, his friend Zaha Hadid, the allure of Bangkok, the revitalisation of Tiong Bahru, the new mayor of London ...

The focus on the social aspects of cities as much as their urbanity and their creative cultures certainly harks back to the influence of the AA and the quest for the root of the issue at hand. Tan's work – be it literary or architectural, and regardless (or because) of its multiplicity – is the product of a yearning for discovery. "In Asia, sometimes we do things for the wrong reasons. Things are fashionable and can be quickly forgotten," he says. "Europe continues to draw me. The Europeans read a lot and they know their history and their architectural heritage. They have a profound aesthetic that comes from literature and the arts. I'll continue to go there as I'm still discovering it."

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Top: A screen of custom-made ceramic tiles shields the interior of the central kitchen at the Select Group Headquarters (completed in 2016). Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Bottom: An elevated landscaped courtyard at the Select Group Headquarters provides a lunchtime gathering space and a stage for company events. Photo by Dennis Gilbert