

PRESIDENT'S
DESIGN AWARD
SINGAPORE 2023

- * LEONARD NG KEOK POH 24
- * TAN KAY NGEЕ 42
- * CAPITASPRING 62
- * HACK CARE: TIPS AND TRICKS
FOR A DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY HOME 82
- * R FOR REPAIR 100
- * SINGAPORE PAVILION,
EXPO 2020 DUBAI 120
- * STATE COURTS TOWERS 140
- * TEBET ECO PARK 158

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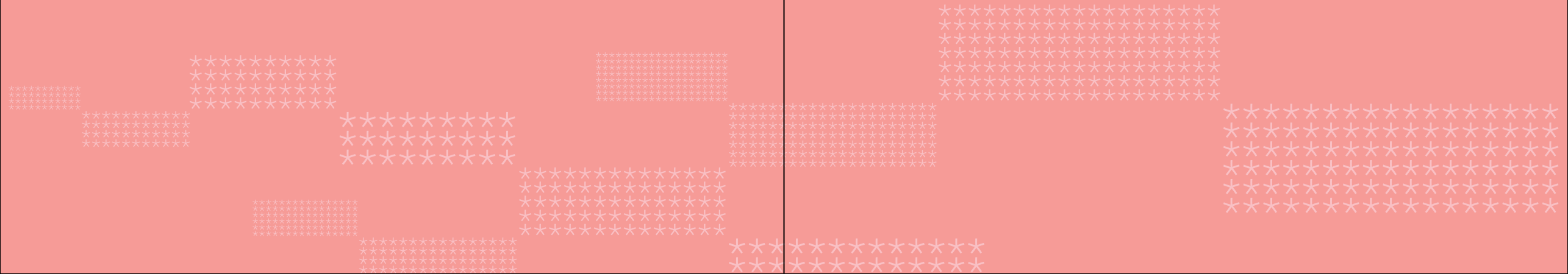
DESIGNER

OF

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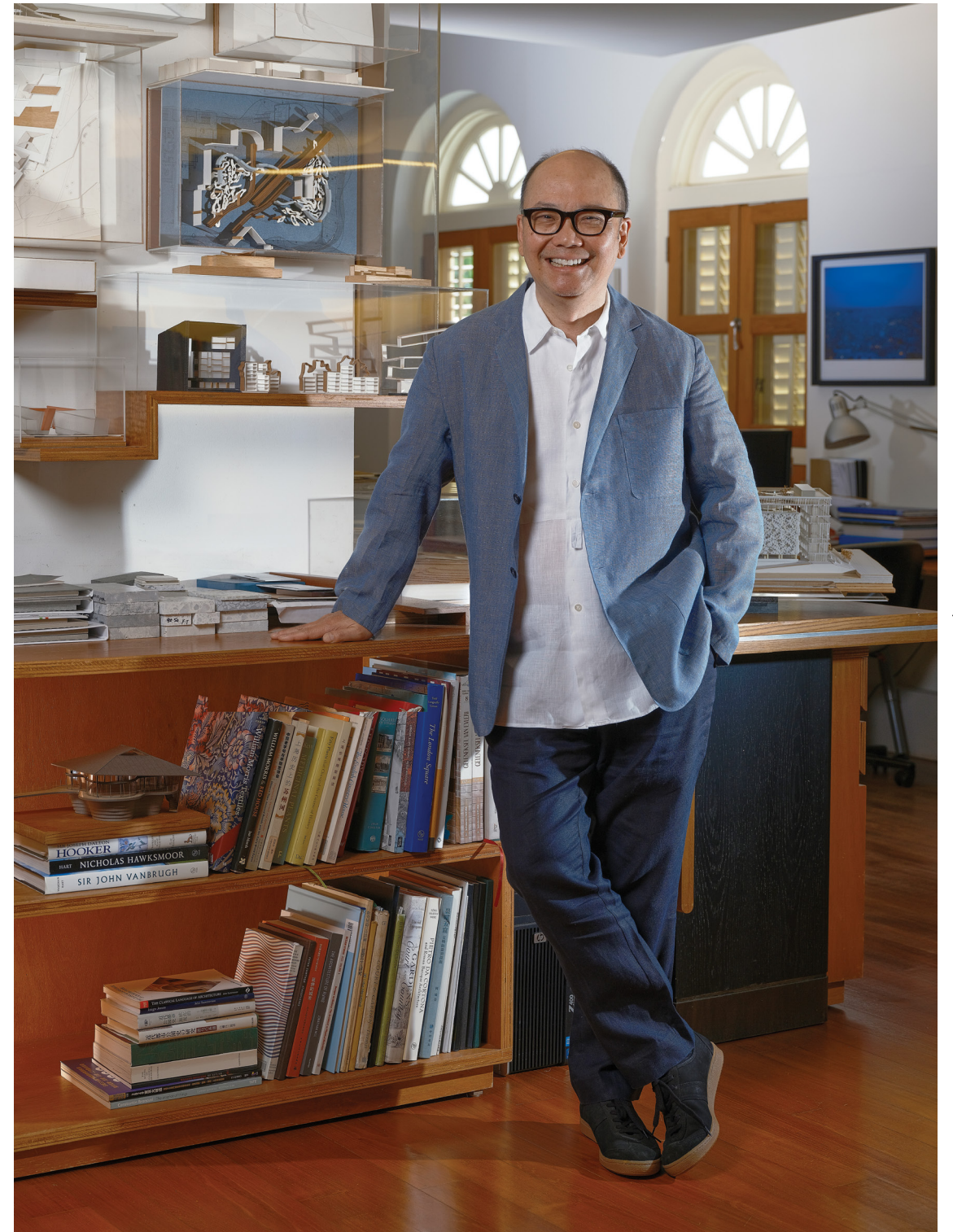
A house where rooms flow from one to another in the manner of a Baroque palazzo. Shelves for a Japanese bookstore that mimic the way a kimono folds. A building facade that resembles the dim sum baskets that its owner serves in their food catering business. Architect Tan Kay Ngee finds sources of design inspiration everywhere, from traditional creative forms to everyday life.

This expressive and diverse design approach stems from his wide-ranging architecture training in Singapore, the UK, and Italy during the 1970s and 1980s. Tan then spent almost a decade practising in Europe before returning home to Asia at the turn of the millennium. He rediscovered the region's rich cultures and began integrating them with his interest in Western classical architecture. Most recently, Tan and his team completed the Gallop Extension for the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which combined his lived experience of English architecture and landscapes with an intimate knowledge of the tropics.

Amidst his illustrious architecture career stretching over nearly four decades, Tan has run a photography gallery, designed theatre sets, and served as an educator. He has regularly written about art, architecture, and the city. Such unbounded creativity comes naturally for an individual who believes that life is never about the destination; it is about the surprises that one discovers along the journey – wherever it may take you.

1

AR. TAN KAY NGEЕ
Principal Architect,
Kay Ngee Tan Architects



JURY CITATION:

A scholar, educator, and architect, Tan Kay Ngee is a passionate and sensitive designer who has sustained a body of work in Singapore and globally over nearly four decades.

From a villa at the Commune by the Great Wall in China, to the Kinokuniya bookstore in Japan and the Old Bukit Timah Railway Station, Tan's works are grounded in his understanding and sensibilities in architectural history and typologies. His eclectic range of works are informed by extensive research that influences his designs, which are responsive to local history, culture, and contexts.

Tan is also a prolific writer on the arts, architecture, and cities, with the belief that design involves all aspects of arts in life. The Jury recognises Tan's rich and varied contributions in making architecture more meaningful and accessible to all.

NOMINATOR CITATION:

Ar. Lai Chee Kien
Founder, StudioMetis

I have known Kay Ngee for over two decades. We served on committees such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Conservation Advisory Panel, collaborated on design projects such as the Shenzhen and Hong Kong Biennale in 2011, and shared the stage during many forums and talks both locally and abroad. I fully endorse his work for the President's Design Award Designer of the Year 2023, and would like to discuss two key aspects of it.

The first aspect is boundary crossing. Kay Ngee's practice is international, with offices in London, Istanbul, and Singapore, while his projects occupy many more latitudes around the world. Being effectively bilingual, and working from these three transnational centres, he has always been able to understand the global and historical cultural flows passing through them. He has expressed these flows in his designs for new and conservation projects. The shuttling between these locations has also formed a mature repository of knowledge of different design languages in him, gathered from around the world and distilled for his work. As an architectural historian, I have always appreciated the depth of understanding, both historically and architecturally,

expressed not only in his past projects such as The Sultan, the Gallop Extension, and most recently, the Bukit Timah Railway Station, but also in his new work based on his understanding of typologies such as the shophouse and the library.

Kay Ngee's work also transcends design genres. Apart from architecture, landscape, and urban design, his practice extends to the graphic, theatre, and literary worlds. He has designed furniture and theatre sets, and created artwork. To promote appreciation of photography, the ground-level space at his Duxton Hill office was converted into a photography gallery for many years, and hosted exhibitions of new local talent as well as foreign photographers of global standing.

The second aspect of Kay Ngee's work is erudition in design. Kay Ngee has been writing about life and architecture since he was a teenager. His thoughts on places, buildings, and life in those spaces have been published in many newspapers and several books. They serve to mentally connect many worlds, and also provide insights to his own.

Very few architects in Singapore write continually over several decades and share such views and

knowledge regularly with the general reader. Architects tend to write mainly about their own projects, and very often produce vanity writing. This is why Kay Ngee's expanded writing for a wider audience is important. It accounts for the architecture world not just for fellow architects, but also for the person on the street. It is a noble cause to translate all that he has witnessed and reflected upon for others.

This literary and educational trait can also be seen in his broad design oeuvre, in projects such as the Singapore Management University, two large international bookshop chains, a library in Kumamoto (Japan), museums and gallery spaces, etc. As a book lover and an author, the transformation of this literary world brings joy and erudition to a larger humanity.

I can think of no other local architect who has culturally impacted generations of Singaporeans and other world citizens, in words and in his projects, in the manner that Kay Ngee has done. I wholeheartedly endorse his work for the President's Design Award Designer of the Year 2023.

You wanted to be a filmmaker when you were young, but your father thought it was not a proper profession. How did you end up studying architecture?

Tan Kay Ngee (TKN): My father was a self-taught electrical engineer who looked after all the technical aspects of the cinemas owned by the Shaw Brothers. He was also involved in the renovation of these cinemas and perhaps because of that, he encouraged me to take up architecture. Although he didn't fully support my ambition to make films, he suggested architecture as it's the closest to art or film making. There was no local arts school in 1977, so I enrolled into the architecture school at the then University of Singapore, a forerunner of the National University of Singapore.

One of the first projects we were assigned by our lecturer Jack Tan was to design a float for the university's Rag Day. While other students designed futuristic structures, I created a hand that could transform into a plant. Jack found it very interesting and chose it to represent the school. That's when I realised architecture need not be mundane but can be expressive and used to tell a story. The more I got into the subject, the more I realised the range of possibilities and dimensions for interpretation in architecture. When it is built, architecture also represents a moment in time and continues influencing its surroundings and people who engage with it. Years later, it became clearer to me that architecture work is similar to film making.

Before starting on the drawing board, a narrative for each project can be established to suit the personality and needs of the client. The design brief can be very dry, but it's up to us to delve in deeper to understand what those needs really are and shape them into a sequence of interesting spaces.

In 1980, you went to London to further your studies at the Architectural Association (AA) and subsequently worked there for a decade. What was this experience like, particularly since you were educated in a Chinese school in Singapore?

TKN Catholic High School may be known as a Chinese school, but it was very bilingual. We were even listening to David Bowie and Joni Mitchell! Half of my family was educated in English too, and my uncles were listening to The Beatles and American jazz. When I first arrived in London, I was drawn to the city immediately because I'd been brought up with these sub-culture influences.

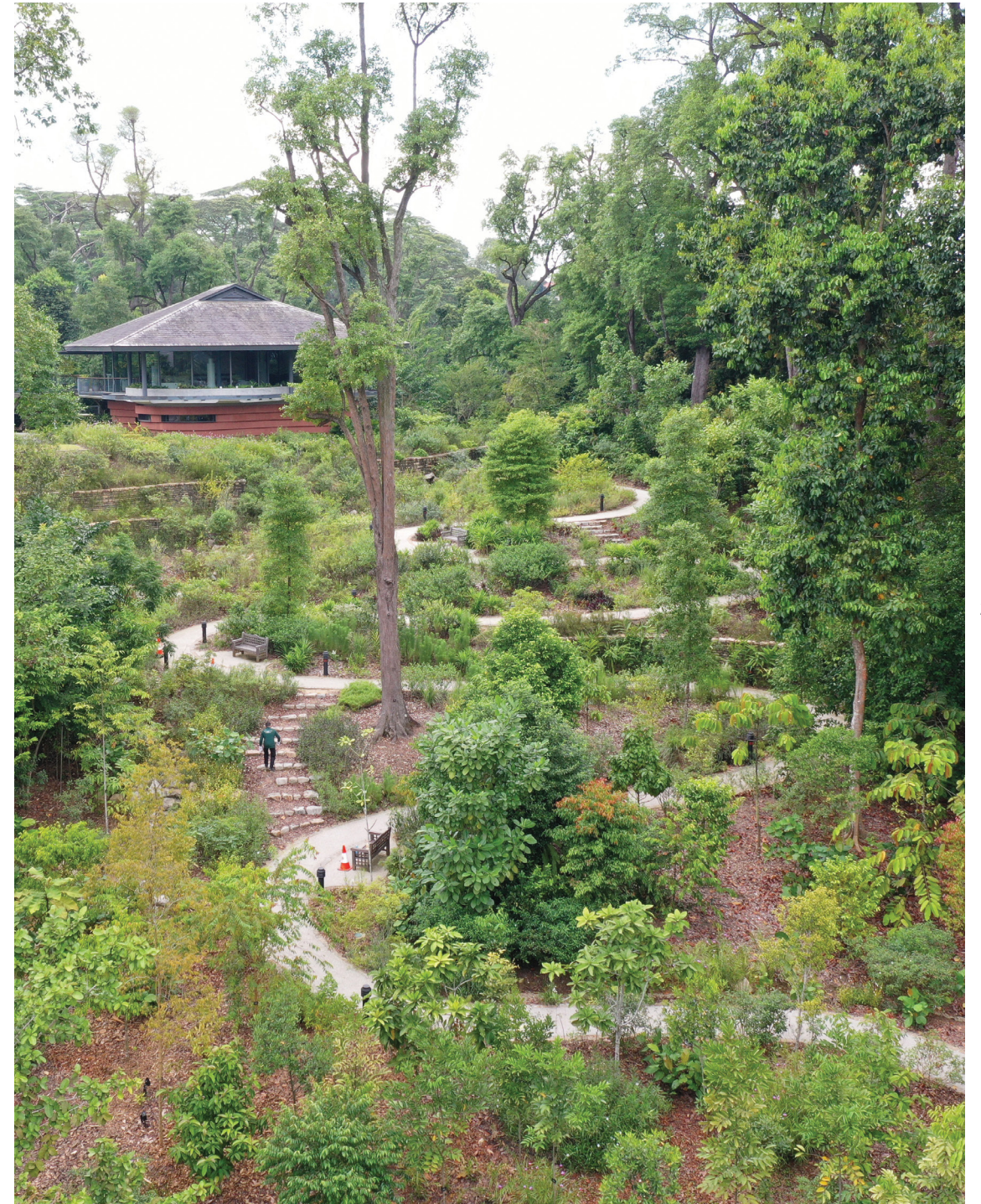
The AA was very multicultural too. We had students from England, Ireland, Spain, Iceland... even the design tutors like Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas were not English. The curriculum was amazingly diverse. The lecturers taught us the modern movement and high-tech architecture, and also Renaissance and Roman architecture. Within the AA, there were units that focused on very different topics. One of the design tutors, Mike Gold, encouraged students to analyse their backgrounds to capture and express their own cultural identities through

2 EAST MEETS WEST

Having grown up in Singapore and received training in the United Kingdom, Tan brings together the best of Eastern and Western cultures in his architectural approach. The Gallop Extension of the Singapore Botanic Gardens (2021) beautifully reflects his affinity for traditional English gardens, blending seamlessly with his knowledge on tropical living.

3 DIGGING DEEP

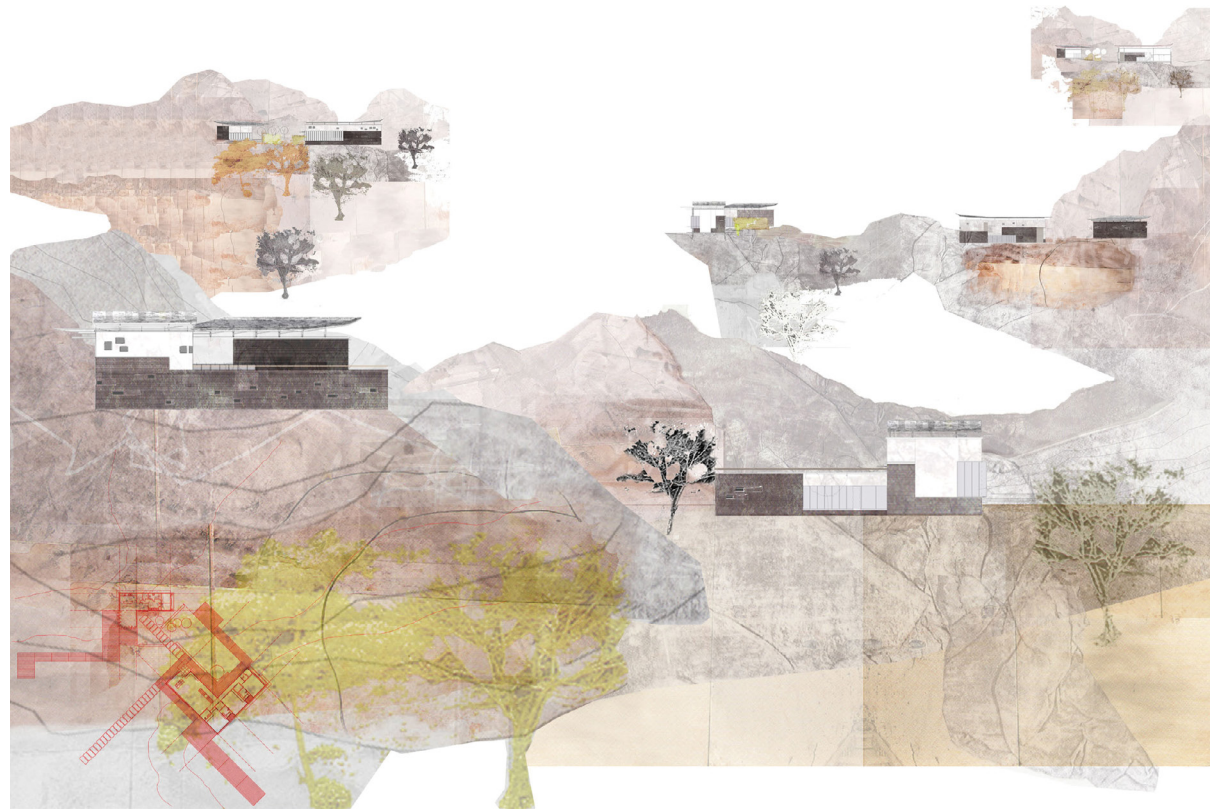
An architect must thoroughly understand a client's needs, says Tan. Through conversations with the owner of House at Peirce Hill (2014), he discovered a shared aesthetic sensibility. It led to this facade inspired by the "Hui" style of architecture, made up of a muted material palette of cement plaster, wood, and grey stone.



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4 BREAKING BARRIERS

Commune by the Great Wall (2001) was a significant milestone for Tan. The project saw 12 Asian architects invited to each design a house along the Great Wall of China. Tan (the sole representative of Singapore) drew inspiration from the traditional quadrangle houses of Beijing but deconstructed the typical structure into two 'L' shaped buildings, creating an interwoven landscape in between.

the design process. This helped them discover why and how designs were conceived, and understand the source from which all original designs emerge. This design approach and teaching method inspired me greatly.

In 1990, you started a practice in London and opened a Singapore office several years later. What prompted you to start your own practice and return home?

TKN After the AA, I worked for Arup Associates under Sir Philip Dowson. I was involved in various conservation projects in London, including transforming a psychiatric hospital into the Imperial War Museum and converting a pumping station into a recording studio for St Martin-in-the-Fields. I stayed at Arup for six years until my design tutor at the AA, Sir Peter Cook, encouraged me to join him in teaching and transforming The Bartlett, University College London, in 1990. By then, I had one or two projects coming along, so I set up Kay Ngee Tan Architects in London.

I was eventually commissioned to build my first house in Singapore, among several other smaller projects. These were designed in London and handled locally by my ex-partner Ar. Tan Teck Kiam, who was registered in Singapore. Because of these houses, we were invited by the SOHO Group in China to design a villa as part of the Commune by the Great Wall – a project that drew a lot of media attention. After we won the Singapore Management University (SMU) project, I decided to return home and register to practise in Singapore in 2000. Having left Asia for such a long time, I began to see the region with fresh eyes and found it to be a very fascinating place to work.

One design category you are known for is bookshops, specifically art and design retailer Page One, which your brother founded, and the Japanese chain Kinokuniya. What are some key design considerations you bring to such projects?

TKN We started working on Kinokuniya in the 1990s because they were collaborating with Page One. Kinokuniya wanted a bookshop in

5 SINGAPORE HOUSE REIMAGINED

After a decade studying and working in London, Tan returned to practise in Singapore during the nineties and quickly made a name for himself with his avant-garde residential designs. This house at Cluny Park (1994) draws from various inspirations, including traditional Singapore homes. For instance, pitched roofs with spaces between the ceiling for air circulation have been modernised into flat, planar forms.



6

6-7 BY THE BOOKS

Tan has designed many bookshops in his career. This includes some 37 outlets across nine countries for the Japanese bookstore chain Kinokuniya with the latest to have opened in CentralWorld, Bangkok, in 2022 (above). He is also behind the former PageOne at Vivocity (2006, right), which was designed for his brother who owns the company. It received a P*DA Design of the Year in 2007.

Singapore that would attract the younger generation, so they took over a unit in Ngee Ann City. We began analysing why it did not work well for its previous occupant and brainstormed with the client what a good bookshop should have. Our design offered clear circulation paths and zones for books. Windows admitted natural light into the store and granted views out so visitors could relate to the outside world at all times. Being able to look out to greenery and sky proved to work as visitors stayed longer in the store, and they could also sense the gradually changing atmosphere of the interior.

Wherever we design a Kinokuniya bookshop, we study the culture and identity of its locale. If one looks carefully, both ends of the bookshelves for Kinokuniya are a modern interpretation of the yukata, a type of Japanese kimono. In our recent design for the new outlet in Bangkok, we used local wood as the main material for the bookshelves, matched with black, with touches of gold. The materiality and colour scheme relate to Thai culture. It's very important that an international bookshop shows that it respects the local culture and is not trying to dominate it with a singular global identity.



7

You have also designed industrial buildings, which is a type of architecture often regarded as functional rather than memorable. What motivated you to reinvent this typology with works such as the BreadTalk International Headquarters (2009) and Select Group Headquarters (2013)?

TKN Human beings long for an enjoyable environment, be it in a school like SMU or an industrial building. The design for the BreadTalk Group's headquarters came about because its co-founder, George Quek, is a wonderful client and the landlord, JTC, wanted to try out something new too. Traditionally, an industrial area caters only

8-9 ENJOYABLE FOR ALL

Whether it is a factory or a school, Tan believes all buildings should have spaces for their inhabitants to enjoy. His design for the BreadTalk International Headquarters (2009) includes landscaped terraces that can be seen within the offices. For the Singapore Management University (2005), Tan created sheltered walkways that provide transparency and breathing space as students and staff get around the city campus.



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for factory workers, which means it is usually dead after office hours and during the weekends. JTC wanted to bring liveliness to this part of Tai Seng, which is known for its many small home-grown factories.

Typically, a factory for a food company like the BreadTalk Group will have a central kitchen and an administration office. The new element in this headquarters is the retail portion on the ground floor that acts like multiple showrooms displaying different brands under them, like Din Tai Fung and Toast Box. It is very convenient for foreign investors who are looking to franchise, to understand how they operate. These outlets experiment with new products, attracting many Singaporeans to go to the building to sample the new items on the menus. The

roof garden and internal courtyards were designed for the office floors, allowing the staff to enjoy unconfined internal greenery, and the changing mood of the environment beyond the office space.

Your works have been described as contemporary, innovative, and avant-garde. But over the last decade, you have also worked on several conservation projects including The Sultan (2011) and Gallop Extension (2021). How do we reconcile this interest in the past with your forward-looking works?

TKN One of the cities that has impressed me the most is Rome. You could be in a palazzo that was built during the Renaissance period, where the architecture will bring you back to Roman times. But right next door could be a boutique selling you the latest fashion from Dolce&Gabbana or Armani. There are these



9

multiple layers in the city. It's the same for London. I recently ended up in a pub in Brick Lane that must be a hundred years old, and it brought me back to Charles Dickens' time. After that, I walked to the Whitechapel Gallery, which was refurbished in the 1980s, with all the modern high-rises nearby built recently. The diversity in the city felt almost like the set of *Blade Runner*. It's not that one must choose the old or the new. The old and the new coexist because they both give such richness to the city, and this can only happen over time.

Besides architecture, you've been very involved in Singapore's arts and culture. You ran a photography gallery as part of your studio from 2006 to 2009, created stage designs for theatre plays, and even curated a showcase of photography from Singapore in Istanbul. How do these diverse interests contribute to your architecture practice?

TKN Painters, sculptors, and architects during the Modernist period were all experimenting and searching for new design languages and forms. I don't think you can segregate art and architecture, or even literature, as they all share the same goals and sources of inspiration.

I am always intrigued by what artists are making and inspired by their work, be it a painting, a photograph, or a film. These unconsciously resurface in the architectural sketches I make.

Another constant in your career has been writing. Since the age of 16, you've contributed articles to magazines and newspapers in Singapore and overseas. What has kept you going for so long and how might it have contributed to your architecture practice?



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TKN Writing is about recollecting and discovering my thoughts and feelings about things and spaces, which would otherwise disappear. The journey is always full of surprises. I vaguely know what something means to me, but it is not until I put it down on paper that I realise what it is all about.

When the editor of *Lianhe Zaobao* approached me to pen a column for their newspaper about 15 years ago, I decided to start writing in a less academic manner to speak to general readers instead. In these fortnightly column essays, I was hoping to share the appreciation of good design and architecture, and question what makes a city tick.

In the 1990s, you were part of a team that revamped the architecture course in The Bartlett, University College London. You have regularly served as an external examiner to architecture schools and recently started teaching part-time at the School of Architecture in the National University of Singapore. What lessons do you hope to impart to future generations of architects?

TKN I will first listen to them before sharing my views. Students are all smart individuals. You don't have to impose or force a belief,

10 CLASSICAL ROOTS

While known for his contemporary designs, Tan has a deep interest in Classical architecture of the Italian Renaissance and other design movements of the West. This proved to be useful when he and his team restored the Atbara (Gallop House 5) and Inverturret (Gallop House 7) - two of Singapore's oldest surviving colonial houses as part of the Gallop Extension project.

11 OLD AND NEW

A vibrant city for Tan is one where old and new architecture coexists. This is why he enjoys working on conservation projects. One early example is the transformation of 10 conserved shophouses in Kampong Glam into a boutique hotel, The Sultan. The project, completed in 2011, won the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Architectural Heritage Awards and paved the way for his firm to take on other adaptive reuse projects.

aesthetic, or design approach. I enjoy it more if I can enlighten students to discover their own way of interpreting things. I often see possibilities in every single one of their proposals.

Other than being original and creative, students have to work hard too. New ideas need to be tried out over and over again. Architects are like scientists who experiment a lot. Some ideas may not work out immediately and some may not work at all, but the process of testing out is vitally important.

The other thing I often emphasise to students is the importance of editing and not holding on to too many ideas in one design.

You have completed works around the world and run offices in London, Singapore, and Istanbul. Why call yourself a Singapore architect?

TKN The definition of being a Singapore architect is a fluid one. It cannot be defined so easily. I am glad to say, as a young nation, we often have the courage to try new things. We have our heritage and a fascinating, mixed cultural identity. In a sense, there is no boundary for creativity.

13 DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE

Every person must be aware and knowledgeable of architecture and design in order for the profession's standards to be raised, says Tan. His design for the adaptive reuse of the Old Bukit Timah Railway Station (2022) turns the former station and staff quarters into a heritage gallery and cafe respectively – offering new ways of connecting to Singapore's rail heritage.



12 SINGAPOREAN AT HEART

Having worked around the world, Tan still identifies as a Singapore architect. He admires the nation's mix of cultures and its contemporary outlook, which was captured in his design for the Singapore Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo 2010. The musical box-like form speaks of the harmony and symphony of Singapore's multicultural society, a symbolism that carries through with four conical support columns of varying sizes.

