

NUMBERS & NICHES

720

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

ISSUE 2 • OCT 2016

Everyday Architecture

INTRODUCTION:

WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

The word ‘architecture’ has its origins from Greek (arkhitekton): ‘arkhi’, meaning leader or master; and ‘tekton’, which refers to a builder or carpenter. Architecture is a broad discipline, entailing form and space-making with the goal of realising safe and comfortable spaces for human living. This issue focuses on building architecture, especially relevant in Singapore’s urban and high-rise environment. The process of building architecture considers function, design and context. These three factors are interdependent, influencing each other.



WE SHAPE
BUILDINGS;
THEREAFTER
THEY SHAPE US.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

At its core, buildings are practical — providing shelter for habitation, working, worshipping and more. Design permeates the end-to-end building process, such as the interaction between solid and void, the play with light, proportion and scale, or introduction of textures. Building design also takes into account its site, whether it is amidst commercial high-rise buildings, a heritage area rich in historical architecture or an unspoilt natural environment. Function was the paramount factor influencing the design of Singapore's early public housing, or more affectionately known as 'HDB flats' in the 1960s. Due to the urgent need of housing for tens of thousands of Singaporeans and post-war austerity, the Housing Development Board (HDB) adopted a utilitarian approach. Flats in the early period of independent Singapore are geometrical, no-nonsense, monolithic and blocky in appearance — pertinent features of the Brutalist style of architecture.

Function, design and context influencing building architecture also change across time. This is more pronounced in cities where spaces are tight, requiring a constant need to re-think and re-evaluate usage of space. The National Gallery Singapore is a wonderful

Opposite: View of HDB flats at Tanjong Pagar in 1976. Notice how a lot of modern HDB flats still look similar. © Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



From the Supreme Court to the National Gallery, this is just one example of space innovation. Others include the Singapore Art Museum and the Peranakan Museum which used to be schools.

example of space innovation, with the former Supreme Court and City Hall – historical giants in Singapore’s civic memory, reconfigured into a sprawling and elegant visual arts space. Housing the largest collection of modern art in Southeast Asia, the National Gallery Singapore building continues to be significant in Singapore’s history and cultural landscape.

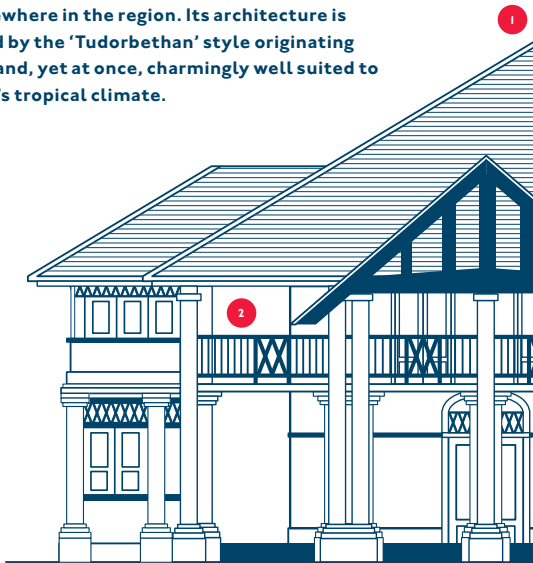
Singapore's public housing in its form, function and design has undergone re-invention as well. Integration of communal landscaped areas such as sky gardens foster human interaction amidst nature. Use of natural light and ventilation for greater energy efficiency is incorporated. Public housing is planned as self-sustaining clusters, incorporating supermarkets, shops, restaurants and healthcare.

Architecture too, also affects how people who live in public housing conduct their social activities: HDB dwellers hold weddings and funeral wakes, play chess games or simply chitchat in the multi-functional community space of the void deck. In some blocks, void decks feature a bird-corner or a mama shop. These are all seemingly organic responses to how the community utilises the void deck, and how the void deck continues to change and shape the activities which take place.

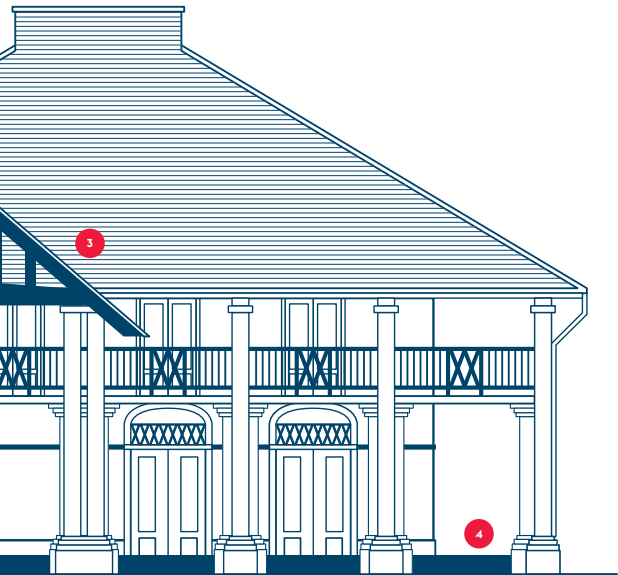
The architect has to remember that our reaction to buildings – influencing our moods and feelings – are closely related to what we see. In a time where function, design and context of a building change at a faster pace, coupled with increasingly limited resources such as space, innovation in building architecture to provide safe and liveable spaces is critical.

Architecture of Black & White Houses of Singapore

Black and White houses of Singapore are not only a distinctive and regal emblem of Singapore's history; they represent a unique architectural tradition not found elsewhere in the region. Its architecture is influenced by the 'Tudorbethan' style originating from England, yet at once, charmingly well suited to Singapore's tropical climate.



1. High profile roof draws hot air from the house into the roof cavity to be dispersed by lateral vents.
2. Extensive use of wood as a structural component: use of timber for the upper storey which absorbs solar radiation less rapidly than bricks and mortar.
3. Verandahs and overhanging eaves shade the external walls from the full heat of the sun and reducing glare, keeping the house interior cool.
4. Tiled ground floor, protected from the heat by the wooden roof, retains night time coolness for much of the day.



CANTEEN

TO CAFE:

COLBAR

Colbar, short for Colonial Bar, was originally a canteen opened around 1948 in Jalan Hang Jebat, catering to British soldiers in the Wessex estate. It moved to its current premises in Whitchurch Road in 2003, retaining its timber architecture, similar to that of colonial Black and White houses.



The image shows the exterior of a building with a red-tiled roof. A large sign above the entrance reads "CAFE COLBAR" in green and red letters, with "9A" to the right. Below the sign is a blue wall with a bulletin board covered in various papers and notices. To the left of the bulletin board is a blue door. In front of the wall is a small outdoor seating area with a square table and two yellow chairs. A large green plant is in the foreground on the right side.

CAFE
COLBAR 9A

COLBAR

A NATIONAL
MONUMENT:
ADMIRALTY
HOUSE

Admiralty House was constructed in 1939 and served as the residence for British naval personnel. Gazetted in 2002 as a national monument, it is known as The Old Admiralty House today. It was designed in the Arts and Craft architectural style emerging from the 19th century and casement windows were also made from timber.





SPOTLIGHT



Look Boon Gee is the founder of Look Architects — a Singapore firm with an international reputation. He has worked on Alexandra Walk, the Institute of Mental Health's Administration Building and closer to our hearts, Toa Payoh and Pasir Ris Public Libraries.

“EVERYDAY ARCHITECTURE”

WITH LOOK BOON GEE

Look Boon Gee will be at Central Public Library on 27 October 2016 (Thursday) to share insights on the life of an architect, his experience in everyday architecture including public libraries, the quirks and challenges of designing and building in Singapore and other cities. Find out more at www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary.

LOOK's strength in architecture is:

in the innovative, unconventional and unorthodox way of looking at spaces, regardless of project.

When we look at the design of a library:

we analyse user behavior and people as the actor to drive the design of the space rather than keeping within the traditional framework of architecture. In Toa Payoh Public Library (TPPL), the bookshelves take on the unique aspects of HDB flats while the tables recall the Dragon Playground. The design is very much an intentional attempt at capturing the memory of the place. Since the general population of the neighbourhood is old, these elements within the library allow the patrons to feel comfortable even as the space has been given a new lease of life with its design. With TPPL, we wanted to capture traces of the present and the past beyond simple renovation.

An architect is:

as important as an engineer and the engineer is as important as an architect. Before being an architecture student, I had the misconception that they both did the same thing. However, they both have very different roles and yet at the same time are equally important and cannot be without

A section of TPPL designed by Mr Look's firm. This is the children's section on level 1 and the hexagonal shape is a recurring motif throughout the library.



the other. It would be dangerous without engineers who are grounded in solid architecture principles. The architect conceives the shape and plans how the structure should perform while the engineers look at the mechanical, lighting and structural aspects of the design and make the technical calculations.

Being an architect shapes my world view as an individual because:

I feel like I have a ringside seat on how buildings are put together. I am deeply appreciative – when I look at Gaudi’s creations in Spain – but also just as critical when I look at a building.

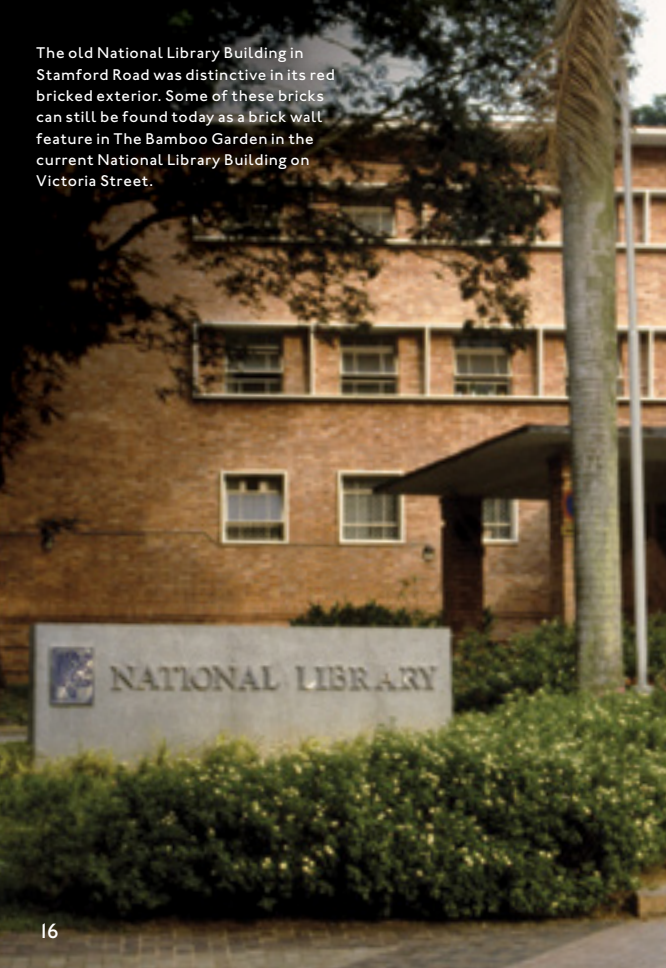
I became an architect because:

I didn’t want to be an engineer. I liked architecture because it was part science and part art.

When I first started off as an architect:

we had to do things intuitively. Now, there are many more standards to be met, such as the Green Mark, which ensure that the building is environmentally friendly and sustainable. My favourite architecture book is Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. I read it as a year 1 architecture student and it was very difficult to understand. When I look

The old National Library Building in Stamford Road was distinctive in its red bricked exterior. Some of these bricks can still be found today as a brick wall feature in The Bamboo Garden in the current National Library Building on Victoria Street.





**The creation is the
result of a journey
of discovery
through talk and
consultation.**

back on it now with all my lived and worked experience, I see it differently and can relate so much more to it.

My favourite library in Singapore is:

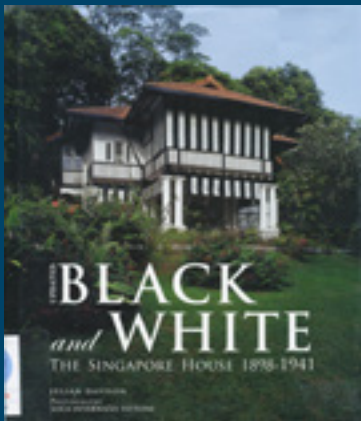
the old National Library at Stamford Road. Even if it did not have air-con back then, I truly enjoyed it.

When building a house and living space:

apart from the questions of “How many rooms?” and “How many bathrooms” the clients want, I want to know more about their lifestyles, their unspoken aspirations, and how the house can eventually express these aspirations. The creation is the result of a journey of discovery through talk and consultation. The client may dream of being a chef, so I may design the kitchen in a prominent part of the house where he or she can show off culinary creations.



Black and White: The Singapore House, 1898-1941



Julian Davison,
Talisman,
Singapore, 2006

—

English Q728.37095957 DAV

The Black and White house is distinctive in Singapore's colonial architecture history. Its singular architectural style — unique to this region — is influenced by the Tudor style of architecture from England, and yet well-adapted to the local tropical and monsoonal climate, resulting in a charming and precious legacy in the current architectural landscape of Singapore.

Library: Architecture + Design



Manuela Roth,
Braun, Salenstein,
Switzerland, 2011

—
English 727.8 ROT

The modern library houses more than just books: this title showcases how libraries like the Rolex Learning Centre in Switzerland and The Bonnueil-sur-Marne children's toy library in France facilitate information, learning and education for their patrons through its architecture.

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All rights reserved. *Library: Architecture + Design*, Manuela Roth, Braun, Salenstein, Switzerland, 2011

Exploring Architecture: Buildings, Meaning and Making



Eleanor Gawne
& Michael Snodin,
V&A, London,
United Kingdom, 2004

—
English Q720 GAW

How are buildings today designed according to climate change and our relationships in the cities we live in? This book sheds insight on the way architecture helps us organize our dynamic and crowded lives.

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All rights reserved. *Exploring Architecture: Buildings, Meaning and Making*, Eleanor Gawne & Michael Snodin, V&A, London, United Kingdom, 2004

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NUMBERS & NICHES is a 10-part, monthly series of talks and curated content based on the library's Arts Collection. Sequenced according to the Dewey Decimal Classification, each issue shines a spotlight on local practitioners and their specific art forms.

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