



Capturing Singapore's architecture and urban design stories for present and future generations

Singapore Architecture Collection

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2023

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About the collection

The Singapore Architecture Collection reflects deeper efforts to document and preserve archival materials about Singapore's modern and contemporary architecture. The collection showcases our architectural and urban design journey, as well as the innovative works of pioneer and current architects and designers, that are integral to our national heritage and identity.

The collection comprises architectural models, photographs, drawings, artefacts, oral history recordings and more. These records not only tell the stories behind the design of our landmarks and everyday places, they can also inspire present and future generations in shaping Singapore's built environment. The public can look forward to programmes and outreach activities to learn and discover more about the collection and our Singapore Story.

We invite more architects, planners, urban designers and those from the built environment industry to contribute their materials to enhance and enrich the collection.



1. Drawing of the National Museum of Singapore (2002-2006)
Donated by William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd,
courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

The drawing was done as part of the refurbishment and addition of a contemporary wing to the National Museum, and the study into how the museum could be better connected to Bras Basah Park and Fort Canning Hill.¹

Behind every design...

is a thought, an idea, a story

From ideation to implementation, our architects and urban designers create many materials over time – from sketches to architectural drawings, physical models, photographs, and plans.

These valuable materials tell both the personal and collective stories about our architects and urban designers’ insights, inspiration, and journeys. Through their stories, present and future generations can also discover more about the history of the time when their designs were created, the experience of the communities in the buildings and spaces, and the legacies that they leave behind.

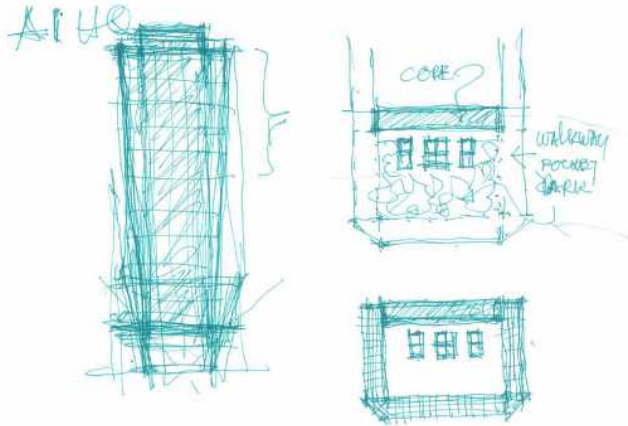
1. Sketch of Henderson Waves, 2005
Courtesy of RSP Architects, Engineers and Planners Pte Ltd.

2. Sketches of the Tokio Marine Centre, 2010
Courtesy of CSYA.

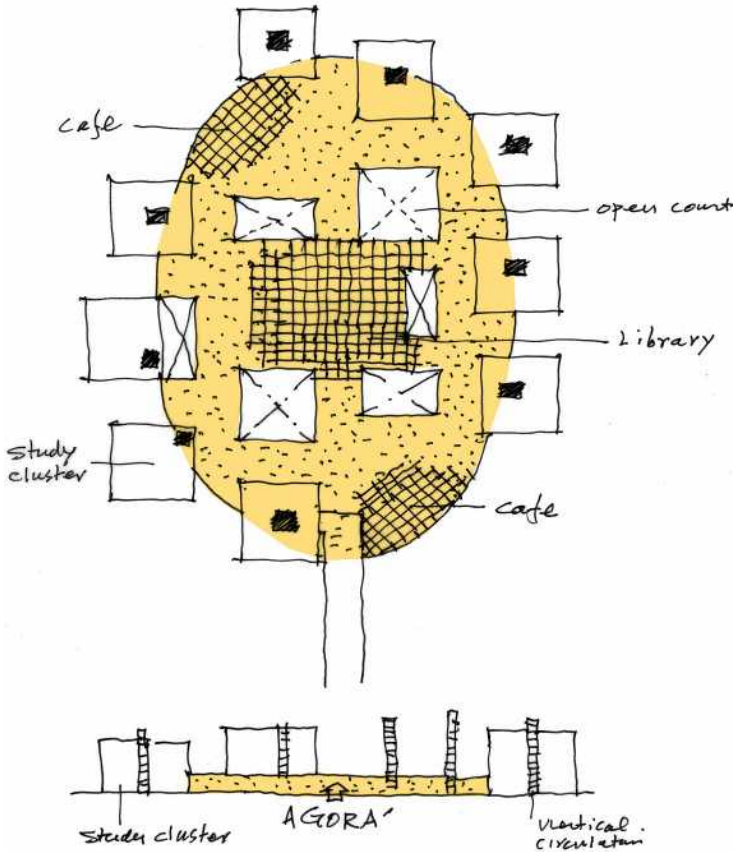
3. Sketch of concept ideas for the Republic Polytechnic, 2002
Courtesy of Maki and Associates.



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“I see the collection as forming a part of a history of the development of the profession - the milieu and challenges, the art/cultural development of a country vis-à-vis its architecture, a larger intellectual discourse on issues of place, memory, and identity to support the discourses on built heritage and the annotation of the state of the art of the building industry².”

Dr Wong Yunn Chii
Project Historian, Singapore Architecture Collection
Honorary Fellow, Department of Architecture
College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore

Capturing our architecture and urban design journeys

Building upon the rich architectural materials in the National Library and National Archives of Singapore, the Singapore Architecture Collection seeks to document, preserve and make available a wider repository of archival materials on Singapore's growth as a city, as well as our modern and contemporary architecture. The collection will feature contributions from architects, planners, urban designers and those from the built environment industry.

1. Drawings of the National Museum of Singapore (2002-2006)

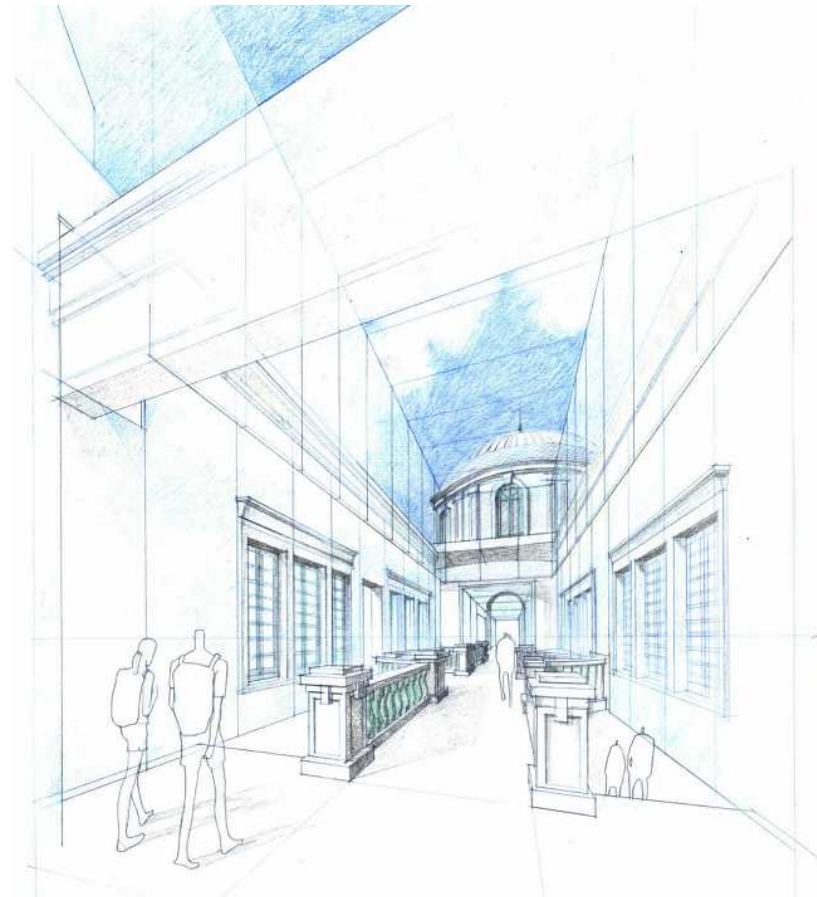
Donated by William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

These drawings were done as part of the refurbishment and addition of a contemporary wing to the National Museum, envisioning the museum as a passage through history starting from the time one enters the original building, going up the grand staircase and seeing the iconic rotunda³.

1



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“Exhibitions that showcase materials from the collection are potentially important exercises of critical reflection in narrating the story of Singapore’s architecture. Not only do they reveal the many threads underlying our built environment, they affirm the idea of an authentic Singaporean architecture that is borne of our own context – one that is sincere and familiar to us⁴.”

Ronald C.T. Lim
Principal Architect, Ronald Lim Architect
Co-Chief Editor, Singapore Architect Magazine

Highlights of the collection

The items featured in the following pages are examples of items donated to or being considered for the collection.

A wide array of materials

From photographs, sketches, to architectural and urban design drawings, artefacts, paraphernalia, oral history recordings, architectural models and more, each item can reveal interesting insights and stories about Singapore's architectural and urban design heritage.

1. Drawing of a house at Holland Road, 1998
Designed and donated by architect Chan Sau Yan Sonny, courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.





1. Drawing of Hyatt Kuantan Hotel, Malaysia, 1979

Donated by architect Wee Chwee Heng, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

Designed by architect Chan Sau Yan Sonny, the hotel captured the laid-back atmosphere of the colonial black and white house and the kampung environment in a new form⁵.

2. Photograph of Beverly Mai

Donated by architect Dr Goh Chong Chia, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

Singapore's first condominium built in 1974 was designed by architect Timothy Seow (1938-2019), who designed some of the earliest high-rise condominiums in the 1970s⁶.

1. Model of of Assyafaah Mosque, 2004

Designed and donated by architect Tan Kok Hiang, courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The design of the mosque adapted traditional elements to create a contemporary version of the arch, minaret and the arabesque.

2. Digital model of the Pinnacle@Duxton

This is from the digital model of the city, developed by URA to study the city and urban design work, courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

Completed in 2009, the Pinnacle@Duxton is the first 50-storey public housing development in Singapore. Its bold design by ARC Studio Architecture + Urbanism, in collaboration with RSP Architects Planners & Engineers, was selected from an international design competition'.



Understanding the design of our landmarks

Architectural drawings of key buildings in Singapore enable architects, designers and the community to better understand the detailed designs behind many of our landmarks, both past and present. These are also useful in supporting restoration efforts for conserved buildings.

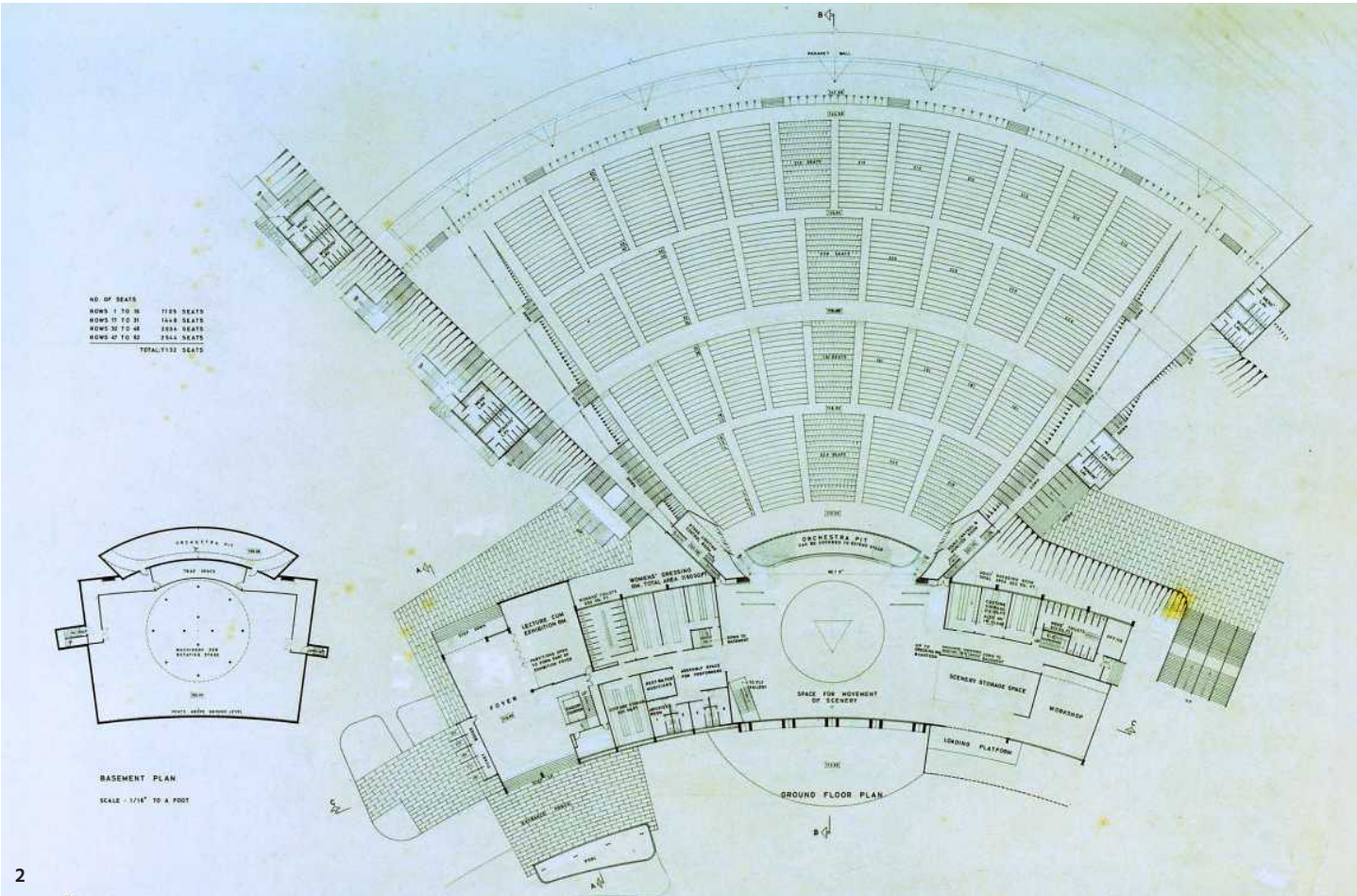
National Theatre

Designed by architect Alfred Wong and opened in 1963, it was Singapore’s first National Theatre. Some of its key features include its five-point façade that represented the five stars of the Singapore flag and its large, cantilevered steel roof over the open-air auditorium. It had a stage with a revolving platform and ample spaces for dressing rooms and storage space. While it was demolished in 1986, the building’s history and stories can still be told through drawings, photographs, oral history recordings and other materials⁸.



1. National Theatre, c. 1968-1970
John C. Young Collection, National Archives of Singapore.

2. Ground floor plan of the National Theatre, 1960
Donated by Alfred Wong Partnership, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



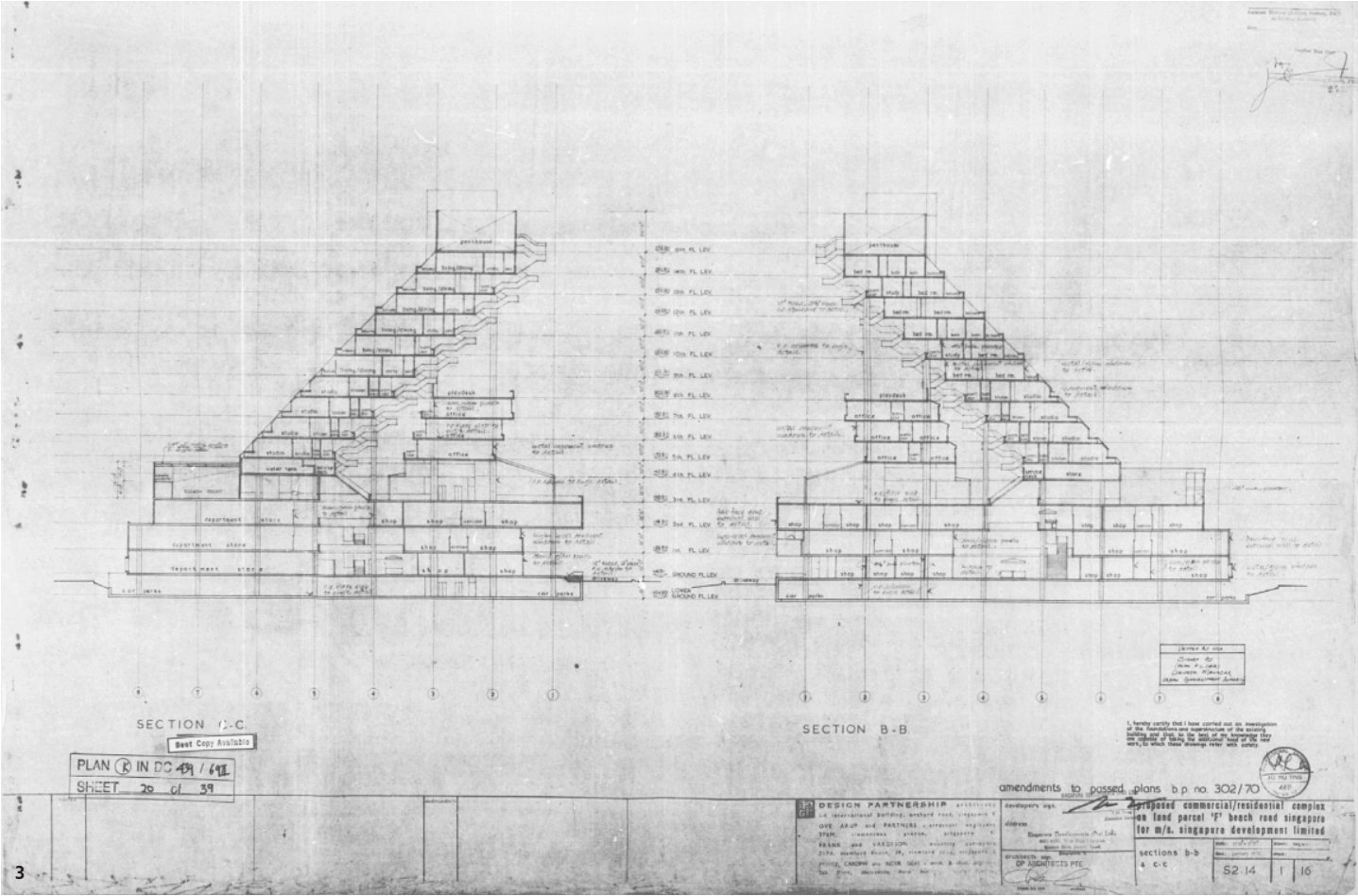
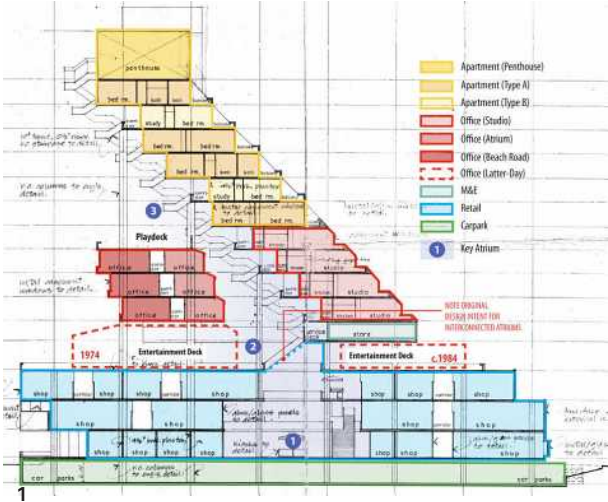
Golden Mile Complex

It was one of the first large mixed-use developments, where people can live, work, and play in the same complex. The 16-storey block reflected the bold vision for high-rise living during Singapore’s nation building days. It was designed by architects Gan Eng Oon, William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon from Design Partnership (succeeded by DP Architects). The building was gazetted for conservation in 2021⁹.

1. Zoning diagram on the original drawings by Design Partnership shows the mixed uses more clearly. Image: Studio Lapis.

2. Golden Mile Complex Image: Finbarr Fallon.

3. Sections of Golden Mile Complex by Design Partnership (succeeded by DP Architects), 1975 courtesy of DP Architects.



Jurong Town Hall

Completed in 1974, Jurong Town Hall served as the headquarters of the Jurong Town Corporation (currently known as JTC Corporation) formed in 1968 to spearhead industrial growth. Over the years, it has become a symbol reflecting the bold imagination, inventiveness and the resilient spirit of our early nation building efforts. The cantilevered upper storeys give the building the appearance of a ship's hull and its tall clock tower serves as the 'mast'. It was designated as a monument in 2015¹⁰ and was beautifully restored by architect Tan Kok Hiang in 2017.



1. and 2. Exterior and interior of Jurong Town Hall

3. South-west elevation of Jurong Town Hall, circa 1970

Designed and donated by Datuk Seri Lim Chong Keat, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.



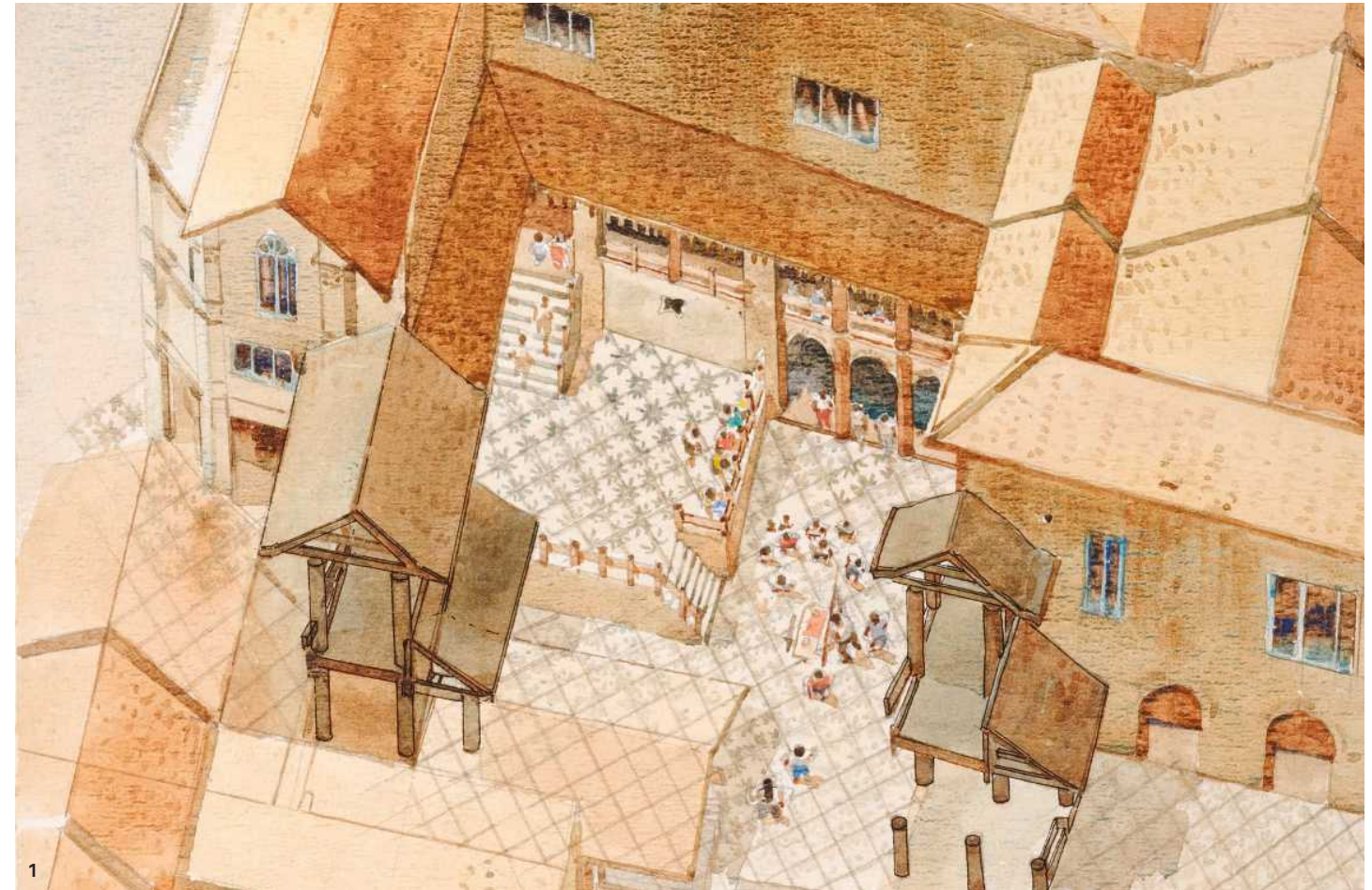
Learning about impactful strategies and ideas

Plans and drawings reveal strategies that have shaped our cityscape and ideas that have captured our imagination.

Imagining Singapore River as a cultural destination, 1982

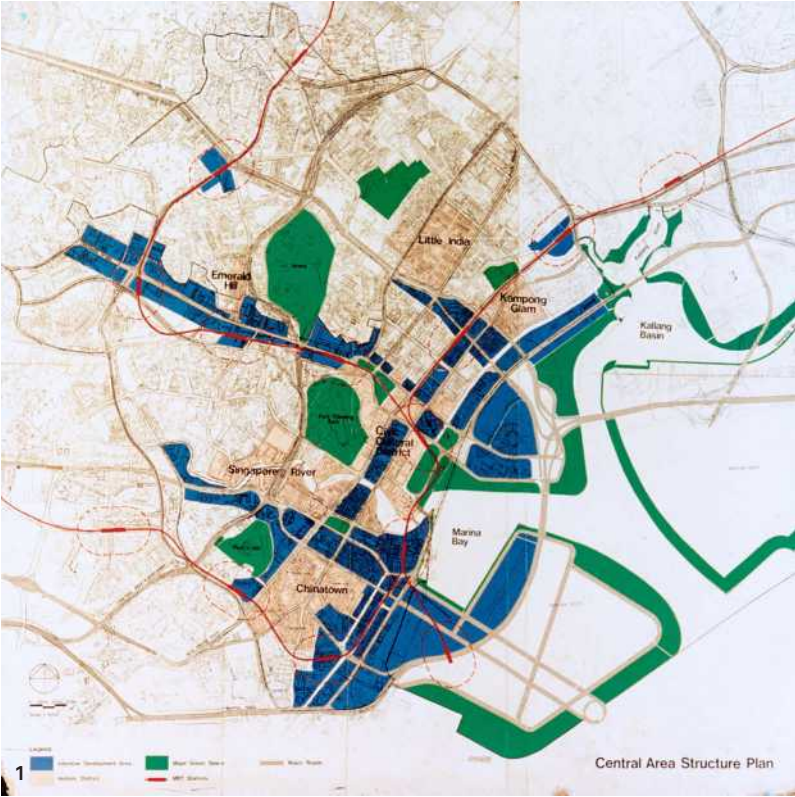
The 1982 Bu Ye Tian (不夜天) proposal for the Singapore River to be a cultural destination contributed to raising awareness and interest on the significance of the river and conservation efforts. The proposal recommended to retain two rows of 110 shophouses for restaurants, food stalls, traditional craft trades and clan associations. An internal arcade could link up a series of open courtyards and a three-storey tea house, with a stage for traditional Chinese operas. Local artist Ong Kim Seng was engaged to depict the rich and vivid scenes of Bu Ye Tian for the presentation of the proposal, based on architectural drawings by architect Mok Wei Wei when working at William Lim Associates¹¹.

1. Axonometry of courtyard spaces filled with activities along the Singapore River
Drawing by architect Mok Wei Wei. Watercolour rendering by artist Ong Kim Seng, 1982. Donated by William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

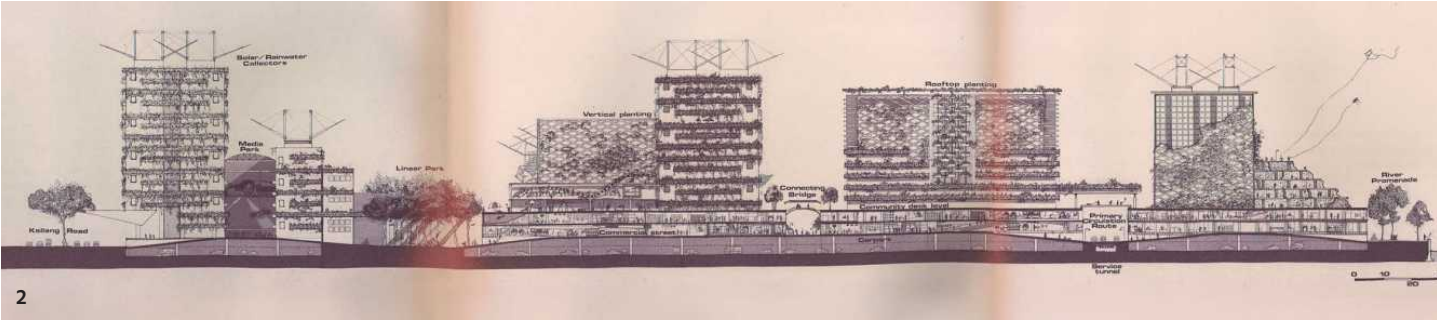


Shaping the City Centre, Central Area Structure Plan, 1985

The Central Area Structure Plan developed in 1985 contributed to creating a distinctive identity and skyline for the Golden Shoe area and other parts of the City Centre. The plan covered details such as determining the height of podiums along Shenton Way, Robinson Road and Cecil Street, creating pleasant pedestrian walkways and identifying the entry points into the buildings to complement the planned locations of future MRT Stations. The plan also advocated the retention of key historic areas such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Gelam and the various green spaces in the city¹².



1. Central Area Structure Plan, 1985, with urban design considerations shaping the City Centre, courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.



Early ideas on vertical green buildings, 1989

Tay Kheng Soon’s 1989 Kampong Bugis Guide Plan was ground-breaking for many of its environmentally conscious tropical architecture features that were novel back then but have been well adopted today. For example, extensive vegetation was proposed on the vertical surfaces of buildings, with vertical shading and naturally ventilated breezeways to reduce the use of air-conditioning. Vertical green buildings became more prevalent from the 1990s onwards.

The guide plan was developed as part of URA’s Master Plan Review. The Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) was commissioned to develop master plans for selected areas around Singapore. Led by Tay, the SIA team included Lai Chee Kien, Rob Hearne, Chua Beng Huat, Bob Powell, Patrick Chia, Winston Yeh and Chung Meng Ker¹³.

2. Section of the proposal for Kampong Bugis, developed by architect Tay Kheng Soon, and the Singapore Institute of Architects team, 1989. Donated by Tay Kheng Soon, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

Getting to know more about our architects and our past

Beyond understanding our building designs, archival documents can tell us more about our architects and designers and our evolving lifestyles and aspirations.



Ho Kwong Yew

Ho Kwong Yew (1903-1942) was one of the leading Asian architects in 1930s who designed numerous modernist buildings.

One of his more well-known works was a luxury mansion that used to be located where the current Haw Par Villa is today. It was built in 1937 for a Chinese businessman, Aw Boon Haw (founder of the Tiger Balm brand), but was demolished after the Japanese Occupation.

Some of the buildings Ho designed have been conserved, such as the main house of the modern bungalow at 25 Grange Road¹⁴, known as the 'Wellington House', and an iconic corner shophouse at 79 Circular Road¹⁵.

1. Board of Architects annual renewal certificate of the first local-born registered architect in Singapore, Ho Kwong Yew, 1938
Donated by Kelvin Ang Kah Eng, courtesy of National Library, Singapore.

2. Photograph of Ho Kwong Yew, courtesy of Dr Wong Yunn Chii.

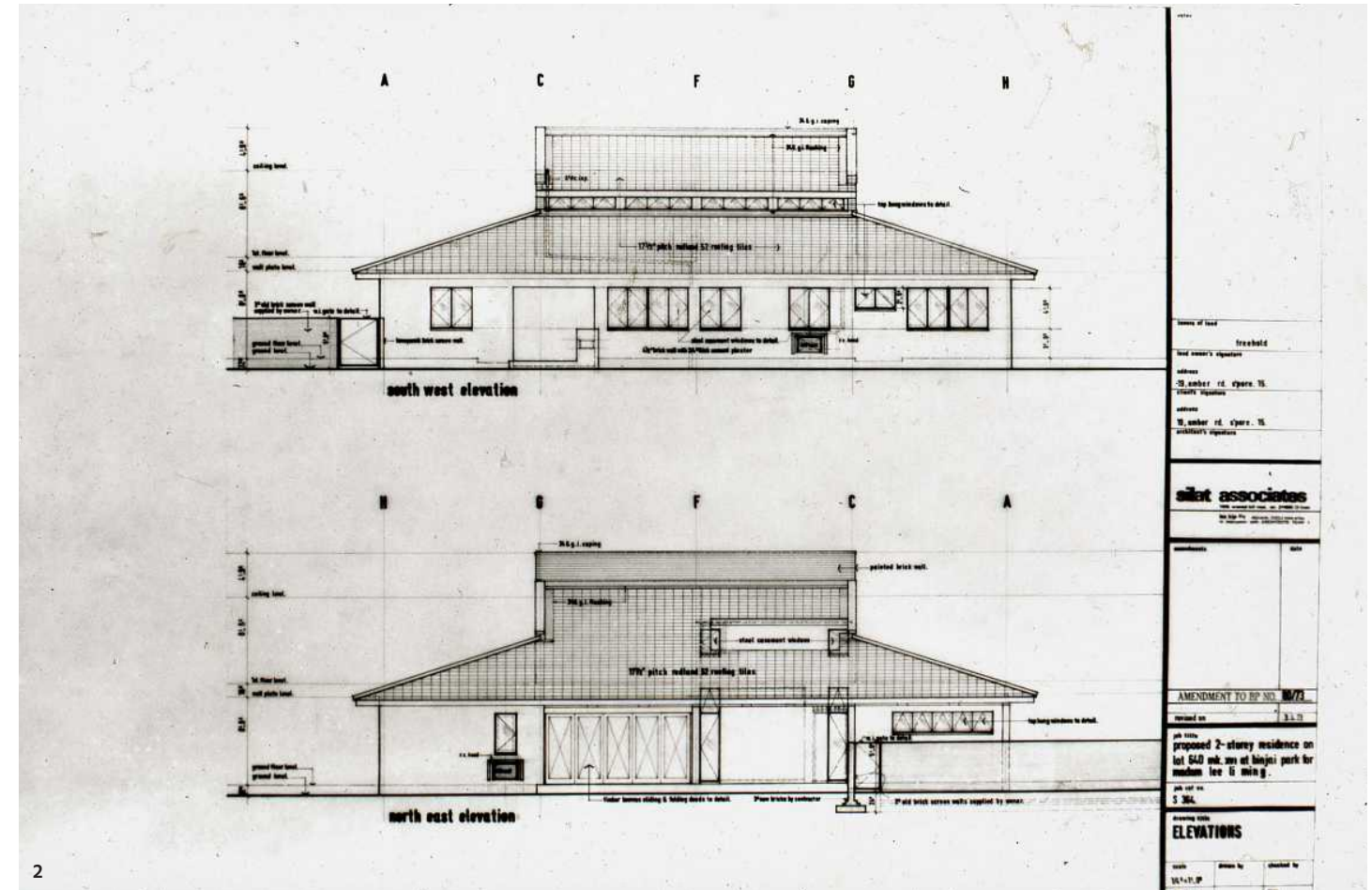
Lee Kip Lin

32 Binjai Park was designed by architect Lee Kip Lin (1925 – 2011), who was an educator, mentor, and a strong advocate for conservation in Singapore. His home is one of the few remaining houses in Singapore that remains largely unaltered in its original condition. According to Associate Professor Tse Swee Ling from the National University of Singapore, Lee's home reflects his design philosophy, which was simple and down-to-earth¹⁶. His son, Lee Peng Hui, shared that his father had designed the family home for the tropical climate with maximum ventilation, a high ceiling and continuous spaces¹⁷.



1. Lee Kip Lin with his architecture students at his home in the 1970s, courtesy of Mrs Lee Li-Ming.

**2. Northeast elevation drawing of
32 Binjai Park, 1973**
courtesy of National Library, Singapore,
Lee Kip Lin Collection.



2



HOCK SENG ENTERPRISES PTE. LTD., NO. 9, CECIL STREET, SINGAPORE. 1. TEL: 8066095254

◆ SELLING PRICE FOR PEARLBANK 珍珠苑售價表 ◆

FLOOR NO: 樓層	TYPE	房式	2ND FLATS 兩房單位 (UNIT A & UNIT B)	INTERMEDIATE 中層單位
26th 廿六層	3 Bedroom	四房式	\$ -----	\$102,000.00
25th 廿五層	3 Bedroom	三房式	96,000.00	95,000.00
24th 廿四層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	91,000.00
23rd 廿三層	3 Bedroom	三房式	94,000.00	91,000.00
22nd 廿二層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	89,000.00
21st 廿一層	3 Bedroom	三房式	92,000.00	89,000.00
20th 二十層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	87,000.00
19th 十九層	3 Bedroom	三房式	90,000.00	87,000.00
18th 十八層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	85,000.00
17th 十七層	3 Bedroom	三房式	88,000.00	85,000.00
16th 十六層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	83,000.00
15th 十五層	3 Bedroom	三房式	86,000.00	83,000.00
14th 十四層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	81,000.00
13th 十三層	3 Bedroom	三房式	84,000.00	81,000.00
12th 十二層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	79,000.00
11th 十一層	3 Bedroom	三房式	82,000.00	79,000.00
10th 十層	3 Bedroom	三房式	-----	77,000.00
9th 九層	2 Bedroom	二房式	64,000.00	61,000.00
8th 八層	4 Bedroom	四房式	-----	99,000.00
7th 七層	4 Bedroom	四房式	98,000.00	95,000.00
6th 六層	2 Bedroom	二房式	-----	59,000.00
5th 五層	2 Bedroom	二房式	62,000.00	59,000.00
4th 四層	4 Bedroom	四房式	-----	93,000.00
3rd 三層	4 Bedroom	四房式	96,000.00	93,000.00
2nd 二層	2 Bedroom	二房式	-----	57,000.00
1st 一層	2 Bedroom	二房式	55,000.00	56,000.00

20-9-71 Prices Subject to alteration without notice.

◆ SCHEDULE OF PAYMENT 付款辦法 ◆
BOOKING FEE - \$1,000 定銀壹千元正

1ST. PAYMENT: (10%) On signing of Agreement for sale, (Booking Fee included)
签合同時交款十巴仙 (包括定銀壹千元正)。

2ND. PAYMENT: (10%) On completion of Foundation Work.
地基工程完成時交款十巴仙。

3RD. PAYMENT: (15%) On completion of Reinforced Concrete Framework.
鐵骨水泥架工程完成時交款十五巴仙。

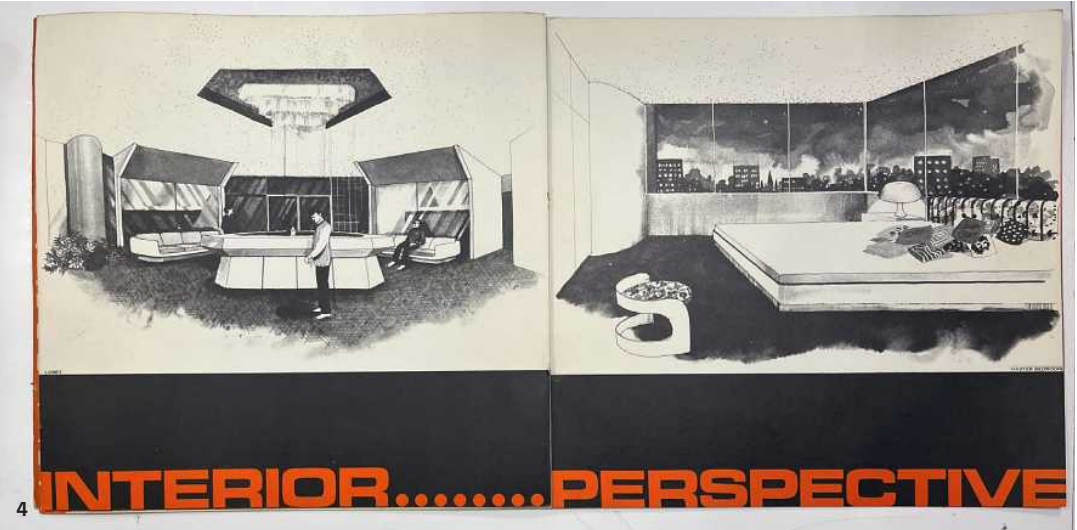
4TH. PAYMENT: (15%) On completion of Brickwalls, Door & Window frames in position.
砌磚工程 (包括安裝門框及窗框) 完成時交款十五巴仙。

5TH. PAYMENT: (10%) On completion of Electrical Wiring & Plumbing (without fittings).
安裝電線衛生水管工程完成時交款十巴仙。

6TH. PAYMENT: (15%) On completion of Roofing & Internal Plastering.
屋頂及內部牆壁粉飾工程完成時交款十五巴仙。

7TH. PAYMENT: (15%) On production of Vendor's Architect's Certificate for roads & drains serving the building completed,
建築及通渠工程完成時交款十五巴仙。

8TH. PAYMENT: (10%) On completion & handing over building with vacant possession 9% of which to be retained by Purchaser's solicitors until the issue of Certificate of Fitness from Chief Building Surveyor.
房屋落成完成時交款十巴仙 (其中五巴仙須由買方律師保管, 待當局發給居住准證[入伙紙]後, 即由買方律師交與買方)。



Property sales material

Completed in 1976, the Pearl Bank Apartments was the tallest apartment block in Southeast Asia then. It was designed by architect Tan Cheng Siong, reflecting early high-density living in the city.

Futura, designed by architect Timothy Seow (1938-2019), was one of the first few condominiums in Singapore. Illustrations in its sale brochure reflected the early aspirations of high-rise luxury living¹⁸.

1. Pearl Bank Apartments (1976-2019).
2. Price list of the Pearl Bank Apartments, courtesy of Dr Wong Yunn Chii.
3. and 4. Illustrations of the building and interior in the Futura sales brochure, courtesy of Dr Wong Yunn Chii.

“A building is not only made of forms, materials and spaces but also conversations, stories and ideas about people, society, culture and the city at large. The Singapore Architecture Collection can hopefully bring them to surface so that buildings all around our city can become legible and even engaging to the public¹⁹.”

Justin Zhuang
Co-Author, *Everyday Modernism: Architecture and Society in Singapore*

**Reflections from the
industry and community**

Interview

Dr Wong Yunn Chii



Saving architectural treasures

A key historian supporting the collection efforts, Dr Wong Yunn Chii shares four reasons why the collection is important.

Writer Justin Zhuang

One of his first discoveries began with a call from a former colleague and architect who was spring cleaning materials for an office move. Upon arrival, he was greeted by a line of black garbage bags along the corridor.

“I opened these bags, and lo and behold, there were tonnes and tonnes of pamphlets. That got me excited!” he recalls of the visit during the mid-2000s.

The “garbage” included over 600 property brochures dating as far back as the 1960s, with those of Golden Mile Complex, Lucky Plaza, as well as Colombo Court and Pearl Bank Apartments. It was there and then that the architecture historian realised that he had stumbled upon treasures and proceeded to lug them home for safe storage.

This was the first of several “rescue” calls Dr Wong has responded to over the last two decades, allowing him to amass hundreds of artefacts related to Singapore architecture. Besides sales brochures, he received building models, drawings, architecture books and even professional tools such as airbrushes that have long become obsolete.

The idea to start collecting architectural artefacts then came to Dr Wong when he was teaching at the National University of Singapore. To commemorate the 40th anniversary of its School of Architecture in 1998, he co-curated an exhibition of the department's history with his then colleague, Dr Lai Chee Kien.

They interviewed the alumni about their school experiences and tracked down their works, including theses and portfolios. After the project, Dr Wong, better known as "YC", became the go-to-guy for architects who wanted to give away their old stuff from their offices.



Sales brochures from Dr Wong's collection
Image: Dr Wong Yunn Chii.

01 Hotbed of cultural history

"Generally, architects see these drawings and documents they create as part of their bread-and-butter work. They create them because the clients require them to be produced. As a historian, they hold many things to me," he says. "I've always had an interest in all things old because they reveal interesting facets of our past."

Consider the illustration in the sales brochure for Futura, one of Singapore's first condominiums, which showcased its apartments with illustrations of interiors furnished with space-age furniture, campy art and inhabited by owners dressed in bell bottoms and suits with huge collars. It captured the lifestyle and tastes during the 1970s when the property was first launched, says Dr Wong.

"It's not just a drawing. It's a translation of popular imagination and desires," he adds. "These brochures are a hotbed of visual materials for cultural historians, and anyone interested to know our past."



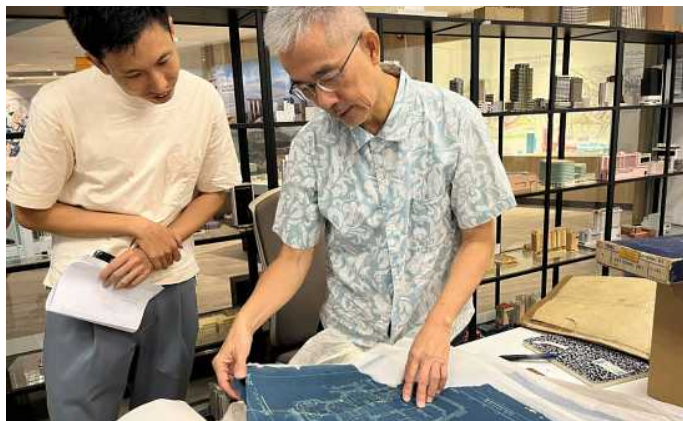
Illustration from the Futura sales brochure,
reflecting luxury high-rise living
Image: Dr Wong Yunn Chii.

02 Insight into architect's imagination

While colourful marketing ephemera may be the most captivating items in his collection, what interests Dr Wong more are the drawings by architects.

These include initial sketches and conceptual drawings that architects produce when developing a design and presenting ideas to clients, as well as submission drawings that are sent to the regulatory authorities to approve the final building design.

"A drawing by an architect or an urban designer is very honoured in the architectural and urban design tradition because it is seen as a trace of the mind," he explains. Through such in-progress drawings and iterations, we get to understand how the final designs of buildings we experience today were initially conceptualised. We get to also infer and appreciate the different perspectives, scenarios and contexts the architect considered in his designs before finalising them.



03 Build our knowledge on design solutions

Architectural archival materials can also offer insight into how architects navigated challenges such as site constraints, technical issues, client demands, and the building policies of the day.

“We have words to describe, but we don’t have things to see. Seeing the architectural drawings and other visual materials not only fill in our knowledge gaps but enable us to infer for ourselves what was it that the architects were thinking of and interested in as they drew and described things,” he says.

For instance, Dr Wong has several sketch books of early local architects studying how buildings interacted with light. The drawings suggest to him that many in the profession were very interested in the quality of building surfaces, probably because there was a limited palette of materials to work with in the past.

“From these drawings, you sense a delight with imagining how buildings might look like in light, appreciating its materiality, texture and the fine details,” he says. Such is the level of detail and study that is required of the craft, and therein lies a treasure trove of insights for future architects and designers.

04 Saving heirlooms for future generations

As a historian supporting the Singapore Architecture Collection efforts, Dr Wong hopes to raise awareness of the architectural and urban design profession’s craft and techniques, and ultimately inspire current and future practitioners to continue improving the quality of our physical environments and on people’s lives. His own private collection of architectural archival materials are also being considered for contribution to the Singapore Architecture Collection.

“For me, collecting and preserving architectural archival materials is like saving an heirloom that you



can pass on. Later generations may view the materials and observe that a particular period of work may be more primitive, but nonetheless It reinforces the idea that we are continuously progressing and improving,” Dr Wong says, as he points to the surviving architectural drawings of cattle sheds as one of the few signs of this city’s rural past.

“If we do not have any photographs or drawings of such buildings, you can’t even begin to visualise. The collection is intended to raise awareness of how things have changed and why they have changed,” he adds.

Interview

Rene Tan Quek Tse Kwang



Image: RT+Q Architects.



Shorefront, a low-rise residential development in Penang, Malaysia, 2016.

Image: Albert Lim, RT+Q Architects.

Unearthing old records, opening up new possibilities

With the Singapore Architecture Collection set up, architects Rene Tan and Quek Tse Kwang, founders of RT+Q Architects, reflect on the benefits of a rich archive, and how it has enabled a journey of self-discovery of the firm's strong design philosophies, opening new possibilities.

Writer Justin Zhuang

Since it was founded in 2003, RT+Q has conscientiously archived the processes of designing its projects. From having each completed project professionally photographed to carefully storing sketches of early ideas, design development drawings, and even physical models of buildings.

With the firm's 20th anniversary approaching, they embarked on producing their first ever monograph, reviewing over 170 built projects from their archives to finally make a selection of 29 projects that best illustrates the firm's journey over the last two decades.

Embarking on a journey of self-discovery

While sieving through the materials amassed from years in the practice, they started to notice recurring themes and ideas. For example, what stood out in many of the firm's residential projects involved experimenting with building forms to create original, functional designs that adapted modernist architecture concepts for the tropical environment.

"The detailed records of our projects enabled us to observe a pattern of what worked well, which then formed the foundations of our firm's design philosophies. It reinforces what we stand for and what we can continue to build upon for the future. We realise through the years that while ideas evolve, instincts don't," says Tan.



Key RT+Q staffs involved in maintaining the firm's rich archives, standing from left to right: Liane Ee, Koh Sock Mui, Nazirah bte Adam seated from left to right: Quek Tse Kwang, Rene Tan, Jonathan Quek.
Image: RT+Q Architects.

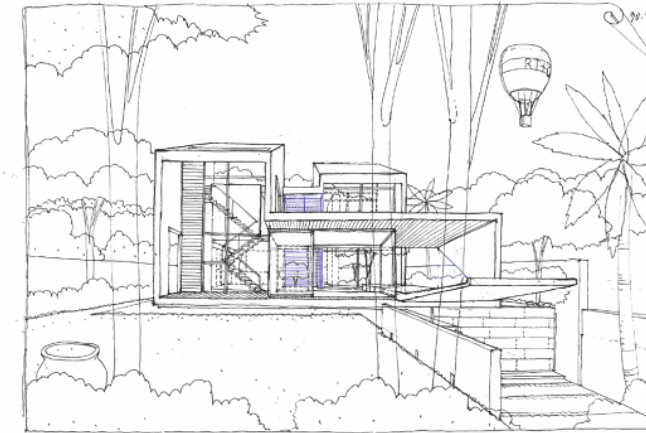
Keeping options open

Besides rediscovering the RT+Q's residential projects, the team also unearthed many of their past unbuilt proposals.

"I have an album of unbuilt works on my phone that contains a lot of alternative ideas we have forgotten about. It's like rummaging through a singer's albums or a composer's manuscripts and realising there are many unknown things that are more interesting," shares Tan.

Out of the several design options the firm develops for every project, only one is selected by the client to be built. While drawings of alternative ideas are filed away, Tan believes that they are equally valuable.

"We are often more focused on the finished product. But we forget about learning from the process, where new inspiration for future designs could spark new ideas or enable us to reflect on what worked and what didn't. This is the true value of a well-kept archive!" he adds.



Hand drawn perspective for a house at Holland.
Image: RT+Q Architects.

Embracing technology for new options

A look through RT+Q's archives almost feels like a blast from the past, showing how the practice of architecture has changed over the last two decades. The firm's early projects were often designed with freehand sketches of spaces as this was how Tan shared his thoughts and ideas with his team.

This analogue way of working gave way to the use of more digital tools across the industry in the mid-2000s. While Tan still enjoys the manual drawing process, which he likens to an exploratory process, digital technologies on balance have made RT+Q more productive and opened up new possibilities. For instance, digital building models created for 3D-printing can be easily converted into virtual reality experiences for clients and visitors too.

"It may be very difficult for everyone to come to the office to see something we've built. Ideally, we could have digital models with a QR code for anyone to see it," says Tan. "Such digital models can be part of our archives too. The exciting thing about digital models is that these can help us further appreciate the more intricate design details of a building that you may not be able to see and experience even in an actual building."



Tan showing some of the sketches he has kept from his own personal sketchbook.

Contributing to a greater cause

Tan hopes that the collection can help people appreciate more deeply the philosophies, values and thinking of the architectural practice in Singapore and allow more to understand their contributions in shaping Singapore's distinctive skyline and the places that we live, work, and play in.

RT+Q's monograph, "Rethinking the Tropical House: 20 Years of RT+Q Architects" features 29 of the firm's projects and how its counter-intuitive design approach of "putting the right thing in the wrong place" has made it one of Singapore's most innovative residential designers.

The firm is contributing some of the materials unearthed for the book and other items from their archives to the Singapore Architecture Collection.



House of terracing courtyard.
Image: Masano Kawana, RT+Q Architects.

Interview

Darren Soh

Appreciating Singapore's architecture through new lens

Architectural photographer, Darren Soh, shares his love and passion for photographing Singapore's architecture, reinforcing the importance of the collection in helping us to appreciate the many interesting buildings and housing blocks that make up our cityscape and home.

Writer Justin Zhuang

How did you get started on photographing Singapore's architecture?

Darren: I started off photographing weddings, events, and portraits but it was only in 2006 that I began photographing buildings after I bought a large format camera to experiment with.

My interest in the craft gained further momentum after magazines such as Wallpaper* and Monocle commissioned me to shoot Singapore's architecture in those earlier years. In the beginning, I focused on making the buildings look attractive but over time, I got more curious about the intricate details and stories behind the buildings that I photograph and started researching more on my own accord.



82 Commonwealth Close.
Image: Darren Soh.



Image: CY Kong.

In the last decade, you have photographed many public housing blocks and shared these on your social media channels regularly. Why have you done so?

Darren: We have one of the best public housing programmes in the world and yet we do not have many visuals to show this. One of the first public housing blocks I photographed was Block 82 Commonwealth Close. Coincidentally, this was the area where I grew up in and was where the first flats were sold to the public in 1964.

If you observe closely, our housing blocks feature a wide variety of designs stretching back from the 1980s when the Housing & Development Board (HDB) consciously created differentiated designs to embrace and accentuate the elements and character of our local neighbourhoods.

It's amazing how housing architecture can also foster a greater sense of home and rootedness.

Beyond the iconic buildings, you also shoot lesser-known ones.

Darren: A lot of my personal work focuses on buildings that are not iconic but are equally important. It's something I find worth doing because our built environment is made up of many interesting buildings that have stories to tell.

An example is the New Bridge Centre, a commercial complex conceived in the 1970s and built in the 1980s. It was HDB's first attempt to do something inspired by the surrounding area of Chinatown.

It was deliberately designed to look like a huge shophouse, with two double height pitched roofs and one taller than the other. Its roof even uses similar terracotta material. When it was first completed, the unusual design caught the attention of many and was even featured in the newspapers.

Another unusual building is AMK AutoPoint, a five-storey industrial building in Ang Mo Kio Industrial Park. It was built in the 1990s to relocate ground-level auto workshops in Sin Ming. Its design by CESMA International, then a company wholly owned by

the HDB, is reflected as a structural design that also supports elements such as the car ramps.

This architectural style was called structural expressionism, which was popular in other countries then and can be found in buildings such as Lloyd's bank in London and the Centre Pompidou Museum in Paris.



AMK AutoPoint.
Image: Darren Soh.



New Bridge Centre.
Image: Darren Soh.

What are some buildings that you regret not photographing?

Darren: The National Theatre, but I was too young. It was demolished in 1986 when I was in Secondary School. Many Singaporeans from that generation, including myself, would have stood in front of its half-moon fountain and had a photograph taken.

Another building is the former pagoda columbarium in Mount Vernon. The design by the Public Works Department combines a modernist structure with an ethnic Chinese roof. It's an interesting choice for a Chinese columbarium and an example of how government agencies then were into this very literal way of using architecture to reflect specific identities.



Multistorey carpark at 88 Redhill Close showing the spiral staircase with a conical roof.
Image: Darren Soh.

How has photographing architecture in Singapore helped you to better appreciate the city?

Darren: It has helped me understand our buildings even more, in finding out why things are the way they are. For instance, Bishan Central has all these buildings with squares and triangles designed on them as it was a way for the architect to create a distinct estate using shapes and forms. So, there is a reason behind every design.

There are many other mysteries behind our building designs that I would like to uncover. For example, in Redhill Close, there is a multistorey carpark with a spiral staircase next to it that looks like a turret and even has a pointed conical roof. I'm curious why it was designed this way!

I'm also very interested in understanding the origins of how our architects and designers got started. Through my work, I've learnt how some well-known local architects today once worked in the HDB. It's interesting to find out where architects started and how their practice has evolved.

What are you looking forward to seeing in the Singapore Architecture Collection?

Darren: Beyond architects and designers, I hope the collection can help spotlight engineers, builders and others who help to realise and build our architecture.

By sharing collection materials and about Singapore's architecture through curated exhibitions, talks and photo walks, people can also learn more about how our buildings came about.

We all have short memories; this is why we need a collection like this to remind us of how valuable Singapore's architecture is to us.

Contribute to the collection

Building the Singapore Architecture Collection is a collective and continuous effort. We call on the industry, academia, and community to play your part to contribute valuable materials to the collection, initiate new research, educate and inspire everyone about our city, curate and create content insights, experiences, and stories about our buildings and places.



Showcase of architecture-related archival items from Dr Wong Yunn Chii's private collection in 2022.

Share

You can use the collection materials to explore new research areas and create new content on Singapore’s architectural and urban design heritage. You are also invited to share more stories and insights about our local architects and designers and their journeys, along with their innovative designs and solutions.

Participate

We welcome you to support and join the outreach programmes to inspire a greater appreciation and understanding of the collection. You can support to curate, present and share more about the collection materials in exhibitions and publications, together with various outreach programmes.

Donate

We invite architects, planners, urban designers, those from the built industry and individuals with architecture-related materials to donate their archival materials to the collection, which will bear legacies for present and future generations to discover and learn more about our Singapore Stories.

Materials donated to the collection will be carefully managed and curated. They will be conserved and protected against material deterioration with proper environmental care and handling. While donations will be digitised in due time, priority will be given to fragile, at-risk materials.



Access the collection on the National Library Board’s OneSearch:
search.nlb.gov.sg/onesearch

For queries about the collection or to donate to the collection, please write to:
enquiry@nlb.gov.sg

The Singapore Architecture Collection is managed by:



In partnership with:



The Singapore Architecture Collection forms part of a larger collaborative effort to build up a design collection for the nation, which covers a range of design disciplines, from fashion to graphic design and architecture.

Singapore Architecture Collection - Advisory and Technical Panels

The Advisory Panel charts the overall strategic direction on the collection focus and priorities. This panel is supported by a Technical Panel which determines the collection approach.

Advisory Panel

- Fun Siew Leng, Chief Urban Designer, URA (Chairperson)
- Heng Chye Kiang, Deputy Dean, College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore
- Catherine Lau, Deputy Chief Executive, National Library Board
- Mok Wei Wei, Managing Director, W Architects
- Professor Tai Lee Siang, Head of Pillar, Architecture and Sustainable Design, Singapore University of Technology and Design
- Melvin Tan, President, Singapore Institute of Architects
- Yeo Kirk Siang, Senior Director (Heritage Policy), National Heritage Board

Technical Panel

- Yap Lay Bee, Group Director, Architecture and Urban Design, URA (Convener)
- Dr Chang Jiat Hwee, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture & Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore
- Ho Weng Hin, Founding Partner, Studio Lapis
- Mok Wei Wei, Managing Director, W Architects
- Darren Soh, Architecture Photographer
- Dr Wong Yunn Chii, Honorary Fellow, Department of Architecture, College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore
- Raymond Woo, Principal Architect, Raymond Woo & Associates Architects
- Dr Yeo Kang Shua, Associate Professor & Associate Head of Pillar (Research/Practice/Industry), Architecture & Sustainable Design, Singapore University of Technology and Design

Secretariat Team

- Clement Lim, Director, Architecture and Urban Design Excellence, URA
- Lynn Wei, Executive Planner, Architecture and Urban Design Excellence, URA
- Gladys Low, Assistant Director, Singapore and Southeast Asia, National Library Board

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- Dr Ho Puay-Peng, Professor, Department of Architecture, College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore
- Liang Lit How, former Executive Director, Singapore Institute of Architects
- Tan Huism, former Senior Director, Archives and Library Group, National Library Board
- Erwin Viray, Professor and Sustainability Initiatives Lead, Architecture and Sustainable Design, Singapore University of Technology and Design.

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