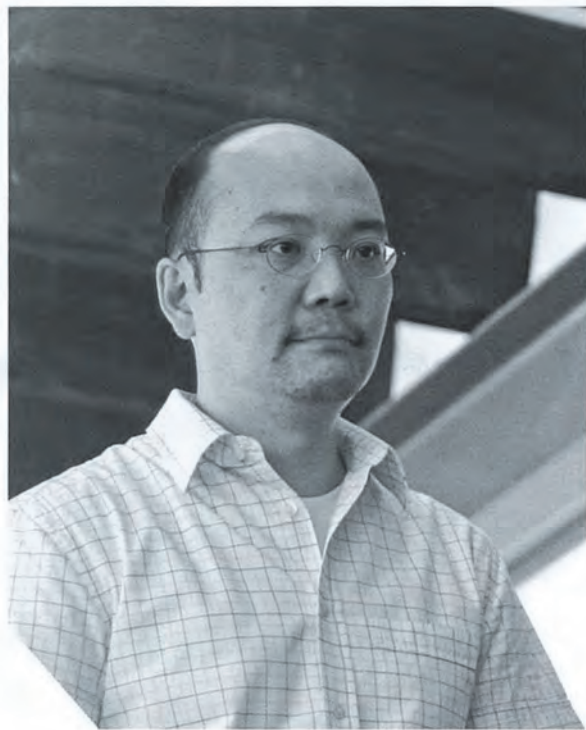


in his element

Interview by Rossara Jamil Images courtesy of Kay Ngee Tan Architects

Architect Tan Kay Ngee is in the thick of things these days with project after project, large and small, filling his schedule. We caught hold of the Architectural Association graduate for an interview on the one full day he is back in Singapore before he jets off again. Acknowledging his chatty state because, well, he had a good night's sleep right before the day of the interview itself, he candidly talks about the architecture scene, waking up at 5am to write his fortnightly column for Lianhe Zaobao and his motivations behind the 10 years – and still going strong – of writing it.



“... interaction is more important than the form of the architecture. My architecture, you can say, comes from, sort of, film narrative and human interaction.”

COULD YOU GIVE A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF YOURSELF?

Tan Kay Ngee (TKN): I'm a Singaporean but a lot of times, people think I'm from Hong Kong. I don't know why. I adopted the Cantonese accent probably because of the long period of time I spent in England. I was in England for over 20 years, I went to England in 1980 and I did not properly return here until after 9/11 in 2001. In 2000, I won a major project, the Singapore Management University (SMU), so I had to come back to look after that job.

I moved here and we then worked on projects that I'm fond of, no matter how big or small, no matter how much money. The attraction is not the income but the nature of the job. So, at the moment, we work on small things like stage sets, and also big things like a boutique hotel in Jalan Sultan and the Buddhist Cultural Museum, as well as a housing project that's very prestigious in Hangzhou, also Kinokuniya in Japan and Dubai.

So, all of them have different briefs. I think I've come to a point as a designer, that I can have fun with this profession. I can really use my knowledge and experience and technical know-how to create things. It's a bit like being an artist or sculptor. It takes ten to 20 years to know your trade well. Architecture attracts many aspects of the profession that you have to know of, before you can say that you are confident and really push the boundaries.

OKAY, SO WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN ARCHITECTURE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

TKN: I wasn't interested in architecture in the first place. I started writing at the age of 15 or 16 in Chinese. In fact, I'm more fluent in Mandarin than English. I was writing on happenings in town; particularly, at that time theatre was not so lively. The closest cultural content we have from the outside world was probably cinema. So, I was writing on cinema like French and German films. I wanted to be a film director, to start with. But somehow, my father thought it wasn't a proper profession. (Laughs)

So I ended up in architecture but somehow, later on, I realise architecture is about space. Film is about description of a story in spaces. So the camera is somehow moving in spaces. Now, when I design a house, even on a two-dimensional plan, I see it three-dimensionally and I see how a movement of a person can generate a sort of interest, energy or activity to make the place lively.

If you go to Kinokuniya or Page One bookstores, you realise people go there to buy books, of course, but people go there to meet people, to see one another. Especially for Page One, I intentionally cut out a slot, so you can pretend when you look at a book, "So, that person is looking at cookery. I'll go over, I'm looking for a recipe for my mother". That sort of interaction is more important than the form of the architecture. My architecture, you can say, comes from, sort of, film narrative and human interaction.

WHAT KINDS OF WORK OR QUALITY DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A PROJECT?

TKN: There are three things. One, the most important thing, is the client. Secondly, it's the brief. What do they want built, whether it's a house, restaurant, bookshop, stage set, housing scheme, or a master plan? We do turn down a lot of jobs, I don't care if it's a big shot or whatever. If I find it boring, I'll turn it down. The third thing that attracts me is the site, if it is interesting. Architecture is about the client looking for a designer to resolve his requirements. But then, the requirement is only the brief which is internally orientated, like how many rooms and what spaces they want. What affects architecture comes from the external which is the site. I do not know my form of architecture, whether it's square or round, until we work on the project, until we understand the site, its surrounding, vegetation, the ground and contours. Those are the elements that we put together before coming up with something.

These days I'm very conscious about reinventing tradition. You see that our works are ultra-modern, but our office is in a traditional house. I feel that there is a debate, whether modern or traditional is good. But I think everything is good if they are good. One shouldn't distinguish old or new. I see merits in old things but I will understand them, digest them and reinvent to create something new.

YOU WERE IN LONDON FOR SO MANY YEARS. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE SOME THINGS THAT THE LOCAL SCENE CAN LEARN AND WORK ON?

TKN: In one of my books, there's an article about the sub-culture of London. London being London, it allows anything to happen. This particularly was about a street in Soho that was frequented by gays. The article was published in Lianhe Zaobao. It's in reaction to what the government says; that we want to be London, New York, and Paris. But the title of my article is, "The beauty of lotus actually stems from very muddy grounds". This means they need nourishment and an artist cannot survive in a sanitised environment. I don't mean gay culture is something deprived or low. I'm saying that you have to allow everything to happen. You cannot censor, but you cannot encourage violence and drugs, of course, but a sort of sub-culture like prostitution, you have to let it happen. In any interesting city you go to, the subculture, majorities and minorities live happily together so society will become colourful and inter-inform one another.

HOW WELL DO YOU THINK SINGAPORE HAS DONE IN THAT RESPECT IN RECENT YEARS?

TKN: I think Singapore is still geared very much towards the economy: something that is profitable. I hope they can see the wider aspects. You cannot estimate or calculate the outcome of certain actions. You have to genuinely believe in something and then go for it. And then you just let people respond to it. It's like my gallery downstairs. I started it about two years ago. The thing is that it's too big for us, so together with Tay Kay Chin, we thought perhaps to turn it into a gallery that has an emphasis on photography because photography is very much underrepresented. It's been very well attended. At the moment there is an exhibition at the Asian Civilisation Museum on Vietnam. Some prints are from our gallery. I think you learn in believing in something, in your ability, just do it. You just do it so that people react and respond to you. That's my belief.





I GET THE FEELING THAT YOU HAVE MANY INTERESTS.

TKN: Yes, I've even opened a restaurant in Istanbul, a Thai restaurant called ÇokÇok. My interests are very diverse. For example, people ask me where I find time to write. All these things, like the restaurant, I do it completely out of interest from the bottom of my heart. When you do it that way, there's a certain burning passion in you. I like my sleep, but I will get up at 5am to write my essay. If that's not passion, I don't know what it is.

Especially for Chinese media, probably the same with Malay, there are certain Chinese readers who don't read Western media. When I came back from England, I wanted to share with them what I see. I had this silly thought that if I could influence these people, then our city will become more interesting. That they will not be biased against certain things or think in a black-and-white manner. Or I'll paint them an aesthetic that they will appreciate better, so they don't have to latch on to what they know, like red and yellow, all the time. So I started with that intention. I've been doing that for 10 years. But I tell you, it's tough. I have to take photos and do research. The writings are done early in the morning, lunch time or during long-haul flights from Japan or Istanbul.

If you ask me why I slave myself like that, I don't know. I think it's to try to get things out of myself to see what happens. A lot of times, I see it as having little games with myself so I entertain myself by doing these things. (Laughs)

OKAY, ABOUT ONE OF YOUR LATEST PROJECTS, THE STAGE SET OF DRAMA BOX'S DAVID THE BEST! , WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM IT?

TKN: I read the text only this week. I've been looking forward to it. I find it very interesting. It's in a way a bit like a play written by Alan Bennett called Talking Heads. Talking Heads was a monologue where Bennett pretended to be many characters. There's a lot of play on characters. For David the Best!, there are a lot of changes. It jumps from one scene, of being on a performing stage or in a seminar room, to being at Geylang or in a taxi. It's something that we can work on. We haven't gotten the set resolved yet, but we could work on the diversity.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST START GETTING INVOLVED IN STAGE SETS?

TKN: I think, if you really want to date back, it's since childhood. I lived along Circular Road long before how it's like now. In my childhood from six to about 12 years old, every July along the Singapore River, a few of those little sampans will be strung together. They would build a stage set on top of these floating sampans. During my childhood, I like to use shoeboxes and I will cut out layers of sets and just force my cousins to play. There'll be little men on sets; and a string with the Chinese sword as if the character can fly. You see, the funny thing is that, I'm not so specific. I will do something else tomorrow and I don't care whether I've done it before. I'll do it if I find it interesting. I do not see a limitation to creation.

HERE'S THE LAST QUESTION. YOU MENTIONED YOU HAD WANTED TO BE A FILM DIRECTOR INITIALLY. SO, IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK YOU TO DIRECT, WOULD YOU TAKE IT UP?

TKN: I think I probably will. But I think I would pick something quite classical, like Chekhov or Tennessee Williams. I watch a lot of plays in England. I watch a lot of Shakespeare. I know Chekhov by heart. Chekhov and Shakespeare by far are the two greatest playwrights. Like The Seagull and The Cherry Orchard, when well done with good actors like Vanessa Redgrave, you really can feel the power of the play. I learnt about life and relationships with people from a lot of these plays. If someone were to ask me to direct, I'll do it if I have time. But I'll choose something conventional. To have a good script is very difficult. ■



1. "Asian View of Life" villas in Hangzhou, China
2. Singapore Management University
3. Corner Green Banquet Hall at Singapore Botanical Gardens
4. A Cluny Park House, Singapore
5. Kinokuniya Sapporo, Japan
6. ÇokÇok Restaurant, Istanbul
7. Les Amis Restaurant, Singapore

David the BEST! by Drama Box runs from 19 to 22 November 2008.