



# SHAPING the future

Architect Tan Kay Ngee's Singapore Pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai has drawn rave reviews. He talks to Felix Cheong about its concept and the importance of the human touch in architecture.



You could describe Tan Kay Ngee as a modern Renaissance man and you wouldn't be far off the mark. The 54-year-old architect is bicultural, equally at home with English and Chinese, in design and the arts. And, like any Renaissance man, he is adept at the written word, publishing his insights in a few volumes of essays. Having written for a local Chinese publication as well as for Taiwan's *Ink* magazine, Tan also has three books to his name: *Never Ending Summer* (1978), *Strawberry Fields Revisited* (2006) and *Magnetic Fields of Cities* (2008), which became the first homegrown title to be chosen by *Yazhou Zhoukan* (*Asia Week*) as one of its 10 best books of that year in the non-fiction category.

But Tan's heart remains in architecture. A graduate of the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London in 1984, he showed promise even as a student, grabbing a prize at the Royal Institute of British Architects Students Competition in 1985 and at the prestigious London Royal Academy Young Designer Awards in 1987. That led him to eventually establish Kay Ngee Tan Architects in London in 1990. The firm has since been involved in projects all over the world, from Tokyo to London and Istanbul to Singapore. For instance, it was one of 12 architects selected to design the Commune by the Great Wall — high-end villas in Beijing that earned the Venice Biennale Silver Award. In 2001, together with ECA London, it won the competition to design and build the Singapore Management University (SMU), a project that was later showcased at the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2004.

Tan's latest design is another high-profile project: The Singapore Pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai, which runs from May 1 to Oct 31 and features a record 246 participants comprising 189 countries and 57 international organisations. Tan's architectural design, dubbed *Urban Symphony*, has been wowing crowds since opening day. It captures the sounds and sights of the city-state, from panoramic snapshots of Marina Bay and the HDB heartlands to culinary delights like laksa and chicken rice. The exhibit, according to the Singapore Tourism Board, is expected to pull in seven million visitors.

Tan is naturally delighted with the overwhelming response. The avid photographer, who has just been named a member of the nomination committee for the ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu Award (see box story), talks to *Options* about his work at his office in Duxton Hill.

#### Why do you think your design was chosen for the Singapore Pavilion?

When we pitched for the job, we did not take the usual approach. We did not go for the Peranakan selling point. We did not emphasise the success of Singapore as a city of commerce. Rather, we went into the heart and soul of what it means to be Singaporean. People in China and, in fact, the rest of the world, may not know that we now have quite a pool of artistic people — artists, writers, filmmakers, playwrights. So, our intention was to highlight this aspect, to show the contemporary culture of Singapore.

We also feel that the theme, 'Better City, Better Life,' is about future living in the city. It's no longer about chasing material goods, but about how city-dwellers in future will cope with the environment and blend with it. Singapore has done quite well in this aspect. That's why we emphasised the landscape and water in our concept. I suppose the jury was impressed by our proposal.

Our building is shaped like a musical box. It's unique and people can identify and associate with it. This box actually emits music. There'll be tunes at the various floors when you walk through it.

### Any plans to replicate the structure in Singapore?

There have been many conversations to have it moved or replicated, either here or in other cities. The material, mostly steel and aluminium, is designed to be recyclable.

### In what way does Urban Symphony represent the state of Singapore architecture?

When you put something up at World Expos, it's actually not about what's been done in the past or what you have now. It's about how you see the future. So, in our presentation of the architecture, there were a number of challenging aspects. For example, the entire structure has only four columns which, of course, represent Singapore's four races. The slabs, the ramp, the stairs and the aluminium façade can all be suspended off these columns. As an architectural piece, this concept pushes the boundaries.

At the same time, I also wanted to experiment with natural ventilation. For example, the ground floor is completely naturally ventilated by having a large opening at the front. On the façade, there are lots of lines that resemble a musical score. These lines are really gaps 10mm to 15mm wide and they're designed to allow hot air to be pushed out.

So, it's not the form that represents Singapore but the thinking behind it. This is especially since the World Expo is held mainly during the summer months. For a tropical place like Singapore, we're used to the five-foot walkway and the internal courtyard in Peranakan shophouses, like those in Joo Chiat or Katong. The architects of these traditional houses have already experimented with how to cope with hot summer weather without using air-conditioners. This pavilion thus highlights this aspect, but in a modern fashion.

Another thing is that in a city-dwelling environment, greenery is often overlooked. A city like Dubai, for example, is very hostile to people. Lots of high-rise buildings and the edges are often harsh. That's why we didn't fill in the entire site with the building, unlike what most pavilions would have done. We deliberately left some space for landscaping, for a fountain and two kiosks for food and drinks. On top of that, we have a rooftop garden, which helps to keep the temperature indoors down.

Speaking of city dwelling, what are your views on Singapore's changing city skyline, now that Marina Bay Sands is near completion?

You can see the result of strategic, careful planning by the URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority]. You can see the trust of

The Singapore Pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai, dubbed Urban Symphony, captures the sounds and sights of the city-state



## The Martell Award

Martell, in partnership with Singapore's pioneering photography event, Month of Photography Asia, has put together ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu, the first juried award in Singapore aimed at recognising the artistic achievements of photographers.

It has one of the biggest photography prizes in Singapore, at \$30,000. The recipient will also have the opportunity to showcase his or her work in an art book. Two other finalists will each receive \$8,000.

Nominations were made in March and April. The final judging of the top three candidates is on June 16. The recipient will be announced during the award ceremony on June 17, which will also mark the Month of Photography Asia festival that runs until July 23.

the people to allow the city planners to plan this 15, 20 years ago. I myself participated in one such project. I was in England and I came back after we had won the competition to design SMU. I spent five years on it. Look at how the Bras Basah area has been transformed.

This is unlike, say, Hong Kong. They've been talking about redeveloping West Kowloon but until today, nothing's been done. Definitely, people can see the URA's vision now. The complete picture is coming together. At the same time, I'm also glad that the skyline changes have, in fact, given birth to two botanic gardens, including a new one at Marina South. That's rare, because a lot of cities would have given the prime location to commercial developments, which would have made the city look lopsided.

There's been debate that in trying to create iconic buildings like the Esplanade, architects have turned the skyline into an eyesore. What's your stand?

Architecture, especially something as avant-garde as the Esplanade and, to some extent, Marina Bay Sands, SMU or the

Singapore Pavilion, requires some getting used to. Often, lay people need to appreciate what professionals are trying to do. There could be factors like aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic education.

There are many schools of thought in architecture. If you're an open-hearted person, you'd appreciate a traditional piece of architecture like this house in Duxton Hill. You will, at the same time, appreciate the Esplanade because it's so ultra-modern. So, it's not about appreciating traditional and rejecting everything modern and innovative.

### Have we come to this level of aesthetic appreciation yet?

I think our young generation is quite receptive [to innovative architecture], not only in Singapore but, to my pleasant surprise, in China too. Our Singapore Pavilion is very well-received, so much so that I've done many interviews [with the press]. It's overwhelming! They probably feel that this building captures something that's Singaporean and also witty. In that respect, I feel rewarded because people look at the building with a smile.

### How long did it take you to conceptualise it?

It took only three months, but I've been thinking about it for the last 20-odd years. I've written a book about cities. I've been looking at what makes a city tick and what makes it attractive. When this project came along, it was like I had found a point through which to release these ideas.

### Over the past decade, we've seen en-bloc sales at feverish levels. We're systematically tearing down old condos built in the 1970s and 1980s. What do you feel about this debate between conservation and commercial interest?

I feel saddened that people do not appreciate architecture as art. They see the money in it instead. On the other hand, I can see that the current mood, not just in Singapore but the rest of Asia, is using property as a

means to invest your money. Architecture sometimes gets dragged into this cycle of buying and selling. It's just like going to an auction to buy a painting or sculpture for investment. Money becomes the main thing; the appreciation of that piece of architecture becomes secondary.

It's unfortunate that most of these properties are private. The government could make buildings like Pearl Hill a heritage building, so as to encourage people to keep good, wholesome buildings. It'd be very sad if you go to a city and don't see the layers of history of its buildings. You either have a very old thing or a very new thing. That would be scary.

### Would we go the way of Dubai?

I don't think so. Dubai's an extreme case. I personally don't like Dubai. It's built and done things against nature. For one thing, it's very, very hot there. Glass buildings are definitely not suitable. And it's also very windy. Whenever the wind comes, it comes with sand. So, be it a glass or concrete building, there's always a layer of sand everywhere, in the swimming pool, covering the mosaic patterns on the floor and so on. And they spend so much time cleaning off the sand! Commerce has done something terrible there. As far as I'm concerned, the heroic gesture is an empty gesture. The human touch is still important, in any city. You can't get away from it.

### Does this sum up your style, a merger of architecture and the human touch?

I think so. One of the finest examples we've done is the Kinokuniya bookshop [at Ngee Ann City]. Lots of corners for shoppers to sit in that will definitely make you feel at home. We also opened up windows instead of lining up more bookshelves [against the walls], to allow natural light and a view out to the greenery, to Orchard Road. That's what you call the human touch. ■

*Felix Cheong is a published author and poet*



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