

Think

Urban issues that matter

See

The city in new light

Do

Tips on shaping the city

WANDER MORE

What makes Chinatown Chinatown?



We seek to stay curious with wanderlust and wonder in understanding our city.

The physical and living spaces around us are “not just shells that encase us, but are an extension of ourselves,” says comic artist Koh Hong Teng on what fascinates him about buildings and places. They are imprints in time and space that hold stories and secrets of what was before and what is to come. Intimately linked to who we are and how we live, we seek to stay curious with wanderlust and wonder in understanding our city. It begins with telling stories about our urbanscape.

Wander More presents 16 stories from the e-magazine, *Going Places Singapore*, that capture places in Singapore that move us, buildings that teach us, individuals who inspire us to rethink our physical spaces and ways we can get started as active citizens.

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Explore

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the longest river?
What if we could cycle
around the island?

We walked, we cycled.
And we stopped.
To rediscover another
side of familiar places
around Singapore.



Croc meat and calligraphy

Step inside clan associations and wet markets to
uncover what makes Chinatown feel like Chinatown.

WRITER

Daniel Seifert

PHOTOGRAPHER

Philipp Aldrup

Pop quiz: my shoes smell like a pungent mix of stingray, frog, rambutan and fresh pork meat. Where have I been walking? The wet market at Chinatown Complex, of course!

We are on a mission to capture the essence of one of Singapore's most well-known neighbourhoods. It is less about physical buildings, and more about the enclave's 'soft heritage': an intangible mix of traditions, crafts and businesses that continues to make Chinatown intriguing. Contrary to some of our perceptions of Chinatown as being highly sanitised, its

local identity and traditions continue to evolve and fascinate us. Some businesses and stakeholders have found ways to retain its rich soft heritage.

Sink your teeth into traditions

What makes this place so evocative is that it still smells like the things it sells. You also get a free show whenever you visit, a whirlwind of activities behind and around the counters. There is a butcher scraping a hog trotter free of its bristles, as lovingly as a barber giving a high-class wet shave. And in a corner, a cageful of frogs, placidly

Blogger Victor Yue shares his love for Chinatown:

1

I have lived in or around this area all my life. As I grow older, I get more attached.

2

I love the typical chatting of Cantonese (like old times) mixed with other Chinese languages. Of course, there's English and the other foreign languages too.

3

There is still the old aroma of the typical hawker food, although more northern Chinese food aromas are taking over.



staring out from a sign that reads “4 for \$10”. They’re next to a stall that sells “live snake head” and “freshwater eels”. Behind the counter is Yvonne, the third generation in her family to run this stall.

“Traditional dishes like this are still popular,” she says, proudly gesturing to her mini-zoo of wares. “Do you sell crocodile meat too?” jokes the photographer. “Of course! It’s in the fridge,” she laughs, kicking the humming unit with wet sandals.

Turns out she’s not joking. “Do you want the address where I get the meat?” She whips out her mobile and promptly recites the location of a crocodile farm based in Singapore. Who knew? (It’s at 321 Neo Tiew Crescent, in case you’re peckish).

Are other stalls here multi-generation too? Some, she says, but not all. “Many

youngsters prefer to get out of the business and find other work.” Chinatown is changing, she admits.

“But for me, I’m fine with change. Things are always changing. All you can do is work hard.”

Things certainly are changing: a frog’s leap from her stall is a beautifully antiquated shophouse next to a sign that says “Free Wi-Fi. Log on to wireless@chinatown.” – Chinatown’s delicate dance with tradition and modernity.

Yuen Eng Wah, assistant general manager at Pek Sin Choon, embodies the hard work Yvonne espouses. Working at one of Singapore’s oldest tea merchants takes motivation. For Eng Wah, that stems from providing a service to everyday people. “It’s not about what Chinatown needs, it’s about what the store can provide for customers,” he says.

“We want to bring tea culture to people here, which is exactly what the founder of Pek Sin Choon wanted. If we didn’t want that so badly, we could have given up 20 years ago.” So how is the business managing to adapt to modern times? For one thing, it isn’t avoiding the online revolution — they now sell teas online, and have become part of TimeTracks SG50, an interactive app that tracks a user’s GPS and tells stories behind local businesses.

Cleverly, none of these changes interfere with the vintage look and feel of the shop, allowing for a sweet balancing act between old and new. But at the end of the day, “We have survived thanks to pure perseverance and passion,” says Eng Wah.

Finding fresh faces

These small businesses still make up the prominent face of Chinatown, but there are other stakeholders that have faded into the background: clan associations. When Singapore experienced an immigration boom of mainland Chinese people over a century ago, the clans were a vital support system, offering protection and contacts in a new city. Nowadays, the government plays an increasingly active role, says executive architect Lee Yan Chang, from the URA’s conservation management department. He and other planners have been focusing more on outreach and place management activities in conservation areas. It’s not just the built heritage that architects and planners care for, it’s the soft heritage too.

As part of efforts to revitalise the profile of Chinatown’s many still-existing clans, Yan Chang led walking tours around several associations. These tours are now led by URA volunteers. Stepping inside these fascinating associations, he said visitors “realised there are so many clans over 100 years old here, still actively serving the community in terms of organising events.” But, often clinging to traditional ways, these clan associations struggle to attract new members in a modern world. Hence one of Yan Chang’s remits was to

help clans foster a more open mindset that helps them put their message out to the world.

“One suggestion,” Yan Chang says, “would be to open up private events to the public.” While some clans still harbour a more private air, others have embraced opening up, and now even accept members of different nationalities, races and religions.

In fact one of our volunteer guides, signed up to be a member. I think she’s American, but she can proudly say, “this is my clan now.”

But for me, I’m fine with change. Things are always changing. All you can do is work hard.

A 21st century clan

One clan that embodies just such a balance of tradition and openness, says Yan Chang, is the Gan Clan. Cleverly, they started a programme that encourages young schoolchildren to serve as tour guides for a new heritage centre that tells the story of the Gan clan. It is a great way to nurture the next generation to share clan stories from a young age.

Such measures are largely thanks to Gan Ee Bee, vice honorary secretary of the association. Previously, the centre consisted of a quiet, austere room stuffed with thick curtains and solemn ancestral portraits. Now, a S\$500,000 redesign has seen the centre brimming with audio-visual materials and historic artefacts (like a roof tile from Confucius’s grandfather’s house).



Image above: URA executive architect Yan Chang leading a tour at Ying Fo Fui Kun.

Coupled with events that appeal to a younger generation like networking and wine tasting nights, the clan is hoping to inject fresh blood into the group. “The current demographics of membership are quite worrying,” says Ee Bee.

The clan has even rented out part of its premises to a high-end restaurant, a clever way to reroute young professionals and families who come for a meal, and are then intrigued by the heritage tour right next door. There are even plans to potentially work with designers who imbibe the rich, 2,500-year-old history of the Gan clan, then design attractive products that weave in that heritage. “I think it could be something meaningful that people want to keep,” Ee Bee beams.

“At the same time I feel we should work with social enterprises that support arts and crafts, maybe done by handicapped groups. I think that’s something that really engages the community and draws attention.”

Havens of traditional skills

Most importantly, perhaps, Ee Bee feels that clan associations embody age-old traditions that they can pass on to the younger generation. Like dialect language skills, music or calligraphy. “Chinatown has so many associations. If each clan could adopt a school by introducing some unique cultural programmes that would be great. That way a premise isn’t left vacant, and it helps clans survive,” he says.

It’s worth pondering the link between Chinatown and the deep reservoir of Chinese traditions and skills held by its residents. The clans are a bastion of this tradition, but if they don’t pass on their skills, the loss of Singapore’s soft heritage could be felt throughout the island. “For example the lion dancers: their art is passed through many generations,” says Yan Chang. “The father is a member of a troupe in a clan and brings his children to events, which gets them exposed early in life. They’ll take part and pass on the art to the next generation.”

With organisations like the Gan Clan adapting to the modern era, whilst embracing their roots, Chinatown’s arts and festivals should be able to survive and thrive. As we are about to leave the building, the photographer asks if we should close the rolling partitions which Ee Bee rolled back to reveal the view of Bukit Pasoh. “No, you can leave them like that,” she smiles. “Sometimes it’s good to open up.”

URA has been collaborating with the community to organise free walking tours and cultural activities at Chinatown. To find out more, visit <http://uraconservation.eventbrite.com>.



Birds’ haven

The birds are flocking back to Kranji Marshes, Singapore’s largest freshwater marshland. We find out why.

WRITER
Timothy Msir

PHOTOGRAPHER
Mark Teo

Stepping into Kranji Marshes in the early morning is like entering another world – new sounds, smells and sights. I imagine this must be what Singapore’s landscape looked like before it was transformed into a dense metropolis.

Lying on the northwestern shore of Kranji Reservoir, there’s plenty to look out for in Kranji Marshes in the 20-minute walk through Neo Tiew Woods, from the visitor’s centre at Kranji Gate to the Marsh Station and core conservation area, including insects, monitor lizards and birds perched atop trees or flying

overhead. It is a sanctuary for migratory and shore birds, and a respite from the city for the rest of us.

Marshes are waterlogged low-lying land areas that flood during wet seasons or during high-tide. They support a wide range of aquatic plants, including reeds and grasses that function as natural habitats and shelter for a variety of fishes, amphibians, invertebrates and birds. While the public might be familiar with wetlands because of the Sungei Buloh Nature Reserve, a brackish (saltwater) mangrove swamp, the freshwater Kranji



Image above:
Second Minister
for National
Development,
Desmond Lee,
spotted many birds
at the opening of
the Kranji Marshes.

Marshes is dominated not by trees but by grasses, sedges and ferns, resulting in an open landscape.

“Freshwater habitats are very rare in Singapore, and at 57 hectares this is the biggest one accessible to the public, so you’ll see a lot of interesting birds not found anywhere else”, National Parks Board (NParks) director of conservation Wong Tuan Wah said. The marsh was created in the early 1970s with the damming of the Kranji River that flooded the low-lying catchment area. It functions as a natural filtration system, cleaning and filtering sediment-heavy water from several canals that flow into the marsh before draining into the Kranji Reservoir. Left untouched for many years, the area became a habitat for many types of wildlife, but the vegetation has since become overgrown, cutting off the water surface and preventing birds from foraging and hunting for food sources.

“If not maintained, the water surface areas will not be left open for long, as water weeds grow very quickly. For birds

to return, they need the area to have a good balance of exposed water area and vegetation,” Tuan Wah explained.

Opened to the public in 2016, Kranji Marshes is substantial and harbours a very rich array of marshland wildlife, in particular birds. The area is an important roosting and feeding area for migratory shorebirds between August and April, and is home to more than 170 species of birds, 54 species of butterflies, and 33 species of dragonflies. One can also find threatened species of birds like the Purple Swamphen, Red-wattled Lapwing and Purple Heron here.

A concerted effort

Nature Society (Singapore) has managed 2 ponds in the area since 2008, when it adopted the marsh under Public Utilities Board (PUB)’s Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Programme, but the restoration of the marshes saw the involvement of public agencies like URA, NParks, PUB, and groups like Nature Society (Singapore), as well as experts,



consultants and engineers to restore and enhance the existing habitats, provide public amenities and facilitate visitors to learn more about the area’s biodiversity. “This is a very good example of the ‘three- Ps’ model where nature conservation involves the engagement of the three sectors of the community – the public, private, and people, resulting in the successful long-term conservation of a substantial nature area,” Nature Society (Singapore) vice-chairman of the conservation committee Ho Hua Chew said.



Construction began in 2014, and it took almost 2 years to clear and develop the area.

Former URA executive architect Lim Chu Hwai who worked on the project said the agency approached the site differently from how it plans parks or its other projects, as the primary user at Kranji Marshes is nature – birds in particular. “In this rather urbanised setting, parks are usually man-made where you can put in structures and plant lots of things to recreate nature. But here is a natural landscape formed over time, left intact and nature has claimed it back, so the primary idea is to keep and sensitively restore this old and pristine landscape for the natural inhabitants. And only after achieving that, to provide public amenities and access so that the public can enjoy this area,” he said.

The project team also engaged nature conservationists and ornithologists. “This is important because there are some very rare species here, and freshwater marshes have birds that are disappearing from Singapore altogether. Once the baseline

4 things to do at Kranji Marshes:

1
Enjoy stunning sky-high views from Kranji Marshes’ raptor tower. Look out for landmarks such as the Moorhen pond and the BBC shortwave relay station.

2
Have a one-of-a-kind outdoor learning experience at the Kingfisher Burrow. And climb to its arch for an instagram-worthy shot.

3
Bird-watch from blinds and hides. Spot shy birds like the Common Moorhen or the marshes’ signature bird, the Purple Swamphen.

4
Indulge in your inner child with sticks and stones. Kids and adults alike love the many twig structures lying around the marshes. Think of all the fun possibilities.

of the flora and fauna of the area was set, we determined where the important areas are, and fine-tuned the development plan: where to put the footpaths, bridges and hides, as we know where the sensitive areas are to avoid,” wildlife consultant Subaraj Rajathurai, who also monitored the bird and wildlife population of the habitat monthly during its refurbishment, said. “We made sure not to cut down certain trees, like the albizias, which are very good for birds,” he added.

To minimise disturbance to wildlife and the marsh, an amphibious excavator was used to clear overgrown vegetation in the ponds and to form new islets. They created different habitats in the area, such as islands for birds and other places for them to perch, what Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve deputy director How Choon Beng calls “mixed-use housing”.

The amenities and facilities, mostly pre-fabricated offsite, include the 11-m tall lookout tower, floating boardwalks and 8 blinds and hides for bird watching and observing wildlife at close quarters. The eco-friendly and sustainable infrastructure and amenities – skylights, green roofs, and benches made from recycled tree trunks – blend seamlessly into the natural surroundings.

Giving wildlife a boost

Singapore has proven that a high-density living environment does not have to come at the expense of nature – despite

the scarcity of land, the government has set aside about 10 percent of the country’s land area for nature, including nature reserves and parks. “In terms of biodiversity, it is important to have a variety and network of different habitats complementing and supporting each other to form a rich and complex whole, otherwise, fragmented parks and greens are generally weaker and have less biodiversity on their own,” Chu Hwai said about the importance of wetlands in Singapore’s urban fabric.

To minimise visitor and human impact on the reserve, parts of the core conservation area will gradually be opened for public access, depending on how the birds react. “We’re not just talking about a dense city itself, but a dense city with lots of greens, and different types of greens. Success for this particular project is how much nature we retain, and how many birds we’ll be able to keep at the end of the day,” URA director (projects) Teo Chong Yean said.

Subaraj said he noticed a rapid increase in bird life and other biodiversity as soon as the habitat was cleared. “So far, based on the variety I’ve found – I’ve just did a survey a few weeks ago and found 68 species of birds in one morning – indicates that it’s been successful,” he said. “The fact that URA is willing to come to a nature area to do planning and design here, and got us [Nature Society] to give advice and consultation shows the government’s commitment to preserving this place as a nature area for the public to enjoy, which is a good thing. The enhancement they’ve done will definitely bring a larger variety of wildlife, birdlife especially, to the area,” Hua Chew said at the opening of the reserve.

According to him, the best times to visit are at the crack of dawn and in the evenings, as there are more chances to spot the rare birds then.

Visit *Kranji Marshes 11 Neo Tiew Lane 2*

Success for this particular project is how much nature we retain, and how many birds we’ll be able to keep at the end of the day.



How do you revitalise a river?

Re-experiencing Singapore’s longest river, we catch a glimpse of its past and future.

WRITER
Jennifer Eveland

PHOTOGRAPHER
Wilson Pang

From Lower Pierce Reservoir in the centre of the island, the Kallang River begins its journey, winding its way past high-rise heartland neighbourhoods and low-rise industrial estates. It flows dutifully through lush parks and concrete canals alike, under massive bridges and expressways with ubiquitous acronyms like CTE (Central Expressway) and PIE (Pan Island Expressway) and a heritage bridge named for *merdeka*, the call for the nation’s independence. Singapore’s longest river is 10 km long, but if ever a river symbolised the power of nature,

the steady flow of time and the ever-changing nature of life itself, the Kallang River is it.

We re-experience the river’s rich history and biodiversity and learn how it can continue to stand the test of time.

Otters and purple heron

An oasis of lush growth amid the cityscape, Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park is more than just an idyllic site for a river to run. It’s a testament to the will and

3 things to know about Kallang river's history:

1

The Kallang river in its early days was home to different communities, one of which was the *orang laut* (sea gypsies), who lived in the vicinity until 1848.

2

"Kallang" could be a variant of the Malay word, *kelang*, meaning "mill" or "factory". Industrial activities were prevalent near the mouths of various rivers in the 1820s.

3

Kallang River became highly polluted until the clean-up in the 1970s and 1980s. Untreated waste and sewage from hawkers and market vegetable vendors used to be dumped into the river.

the ability of people to reclaim their natural heritage. Where the river once passed through a gaping concrete gash of a canal, it now feeds 62 hectares of parkland frequented by wildlife, thanks to the Active, Beautiful and Clean Waters Programme (ABC Waters) by the Public Utilities Board (PUB) and National Parks Board (NParks).

"The greening of the river along this stretch is very effective in terms of biodiversity and aesthetics," says Dr Ho Hua Chew, vice-chair of the Conservation Committee at the Nature Society (Singapore) (NSS). Speaking from his own experience, he's noticed more marshland birdlife feeding along the river and the marshy banks.

"Very significant is the appearance of a family of smooth otters, and the nesting of a purple heron on an angasana tree by the riverside," says Hua Chew. "Frequent and regular otter sightings indicate that they have made their home here and not just visiting or exploring. The nesting of the purple heron is a first for Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park and is very important, as nesting sites of this species are rare in Singapore. It's a good sign of the health and viability of the wetland at this stretch."

Hua Chew believes we can dig further into

our natural heritage by literally digging deeper under the river itself.

In the NSS 2007 feedback on Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park ABC Waters Programme, in which Hua Chew was involved, the society advocated for the removal of concrete from the entire river bed and not just the banks. "The uncovering of the mud-bed of the former canal, even to some extent, would attract wildlife that haunts the softer mud-beds at the shallow waters as well as the river-bottom," he says. "This will make the river more alive and interesting as well as ecologically beneficial."

Living by the river's edge

More than 800,000 residents live within 2 km from the river. Gently down the stream in Geylang Bahru, residents can be seen fishing every day and, on rare occasions, kayaking. When the Ng family moved here in 2007 they had no idea how much they would enjoy the river. They chose their block, which is nestled in a fork where a canal branches off towards Whampoa, in part for the unobstructed view that follows the path of the river where it runs to the sea. On a clear day you can spy tiny cargo ships on the horizon. This wouldn't be possible if not for the river, says Bernard Ng. He spends time with his family by the river jogging, scooting and fishing.

"In Singapore, there is so much water around us, but there is comparatively very little interaction with the water," he says. There's a lot of safety concerns about getting into the water but that issue can be explored progressively. "There's no need for planned water activities, either," he adds. "Just go in and dip your feet in



The greening of the river along this stretch is very effective in terms of biodiversity and aesthetics.

and that's enough."

Rich with landmarks

To see Kallang Basin now, it's hard to imagine the swamplands where early Javanese settlers, the *orang kallang*, lived on boats over 200 years ago. They were resettled long before decades of land reclamation began in the 1930s, permanently changing the river's course. The 1960s saw kampong houses making way for Housing & Development Board flats and industrial blocks. By the late 1970s, the water had turned to filth, prompting a clean-up that would spark Singapore's water story.

Over time, the area grew rich with landmarks. Still today, the circa-1888 Sri Manmatha Karuneshvarar Temple welcomes Hindu devotees, and the Merdeka Bridge, built in 1956, connects the riverbanks via Nicoll Highway. The former Kallang Airport that hasn't seen a plane since 1955 is now used for sports, recreation, offices or other forms of community uses in the interim. The terminal building has been gazetted for

conservation in 2008. The airport was Singapore's first purpose-built civil airport commissioned by the British colonial government in the 1930s. When it first opened, it was touted as one of the most modern airport of its time with revolutionary facilities. Its runway is now Old Airport Road; its control tower vacant.

Remembering the old Kallang Gasworks, Lim Leong Seng, the sculptor created The Spirit of Kallang, using pipes and other fittings from the gasworks. Kallang Gasworks was built in 1862 by the Singapore Gas Company to supply piped gas for street lighting. Many locals would avoid the Kallang area due to the strong stench of gas and fears of the plant exploding, giving it the name "fire city", or *huay sia* in Hokkien. After over 130 years of service, supplying the nation's first piped gas to fuel streetlights and employing generations, it was phased out in 1998. "Preserving memories of these public places is important since it highlights the social obligation of the citizenry and gives them a sense of belonging despite a relative short



historical heritage,” says Leong Seng.

The kallang wave

As the river nears the sea, its banks widen to form the Kallang Basin, a large body of water made fresh after the construction of the Marina Barrage in 2008. It's hard to miss the Singapore Sports Hub, the massive complex built to house virtually every sport facility Singaporeans can imagine. Kallang has been synonymous with sports since the 1973 opening of the original National Stadium. The new mega sporting complex which replaced it in 2014 will build on that legacy.

“It's unlike other stadiums which are built for the sole purpose of hosting major games,” says Chin Sau Ho, Singapore Sports Club senior director of corporate communications and stakeholder management. “We have a long-term vision of serving as a catalyst for the emergence of sport in Singapore.” Around the shores of the basin, joggers run through shady parks and kayakers launch their boats from palm-lined beaches, and not a day passes without spotting a dragon boat plying the calm waters. “Kallang is the main venue for our events,” says Jason Chen, founder of Dragon Boat Innovate, an events company that organises corporate dragon boating activities. For over 20 years Jason has been a competitive paddler, coach and dragon boat advocate. “I live for dragon boating,” he says. He launches his events from a few of the parks surrounding Kallang Basin, which he says are very impressive to his clients, meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) travellers. “They also get to see the Central Business District from the middle of the Kallang Basin, and the natural side of Singapore they don't get to see from the inside of a hotel room,” he says.

Jason remembers when paddlers had the freedom to travel upriver all the way to Bishan, exploring the network of canals that go through distinct neighbourhoods from the water's vantage point. It is an unforgettable experience for him.

The river's future

The river offers fresh possibilities for more to enjoy its meandering streams, strolling, cycling and mingling through neighbourhoods and communities and living and working close to the water's edge. And for more to come out to play, with a wider range of sporting activities and community spaces, celebrating its spirit and beauty.

URA planners reimagined the river's future with these top 10 ideas revealed in 2017.

Green Corridor

1. **Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park to Gardens by the Bay** – greenery along the river can be enhanced, tapping on the rich biodiversity within these two parks.
2. **Underpass below the Central Expressway (CTE)** – this space could be turned into a vibrant community space with better headroom, lighting and seating.

Bridging Neighbourhoods

3. **Across Kallang Bahru and Upper Boon Keng Roads** – possible underpasses could be developed across these roads for seamless access for pedestrians and cyclists.
4. **Below Sims Avenue** – a possible underpass link can be developed for greater connectivity along the riverfront to the Sports Hub.
5. **Across the Pan Island Expressway (PIE)** – What if you can cycle or jog across the PIE? A possible cyclist-friendly crossing over the PIE can make this a reality.

New Homes & Communities

6. **Kallang Distripark** – close to the upcoming Geylang Bahru MRT, this private industrial estate can be transformed into a quality residential precinct in future, with park and recreational spaces.
7. **Kallang Industrial Estate** – this 73 ha estate can be turned into a vibrant mixed-use precinct with high-rise facilities to meet modern industrial needs, closely integrated with future residential developments along the waterfront and parks.
8. **Kampong Bugis** – a stone's throw away from the Lavendar and Kallang MRT stations, the area is planned to be an attractive precinct that supports active mobility and environmental sustainability.

Enlivening the River

9. **Kallang Riverside** – this area is envisioned to be a vibrant mixed use district in the longer term. In the interim, the conserved Kallang airport terminal can be re-used for community sports and recreational activities.
10. **Waterfront along Jalan Benaan Kapal** – a possible 8 ha play zone with recreational and sporting facilities for all ages is being studied

What if you could cycle this island?

Photographer Joseph Nair tries out 3 cycling routes unveiling stunning views that entice us to step on that bike again.

WRITER / PHOTOGRAPHER
Joseph Nair

I don't own a car, so getting from point A to B always meant a bus, taxi or MRT ride. Cycling has never been an option for me. Cycling, or so I thought, was only for the Dutch and the Lycra-clad.

But with LOOP, an app designed by students from the Singapore Management University, a journey planner and route tracker designed for recreational and newbie cyclists like me, I borrowed a foldable bike, dug up a helmet and hit the streets. Thankfully, one cannot forget how to ride a bike.

The commute test (route 1)

The first step: test how practical LOOP is for a commute. Queenstown and Aljunied seemed a reasonable distance, so off I went. I fired up the app, entered the coordinates, and picked between the 'shortest' or 'safest' route. The latter felt more suitable for me, the almost-never cyclist, but I went a step further and divided the route into two: from Queenstown to Raffles Place, and then to Sims Drive, where I had arranged to meet a friend. Once everything was keyed in, off I went.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a 'Scenic Meander' mode on LOOP – but that's where my photographer's instincts kicked in. So for my first scenic stop, I climbed up to the roof garden on the 47th floor of SkyVille @ Dawson. From this vantage point, Indonesia's Riau Islands peeked out from behind the blocks of Telok Blangah, and to the north, the city of Johor Bahru was visible.

After scouting out the rooftop – there's a jogging path encircling it – I took the lift down, hopped on the bike and continued my journey. Or at least tried to. The seat of my bike was too hard, and I knew I needed to do something about it. Fortunately, I met a bicycle courier while waiting for a traffic light who pointed me to a bike shop nearby where I could find a padded seat cover.

Route 1



The map on LOOP marked the shop out at a corner of a HDB block nearby. So I wheeled the bike over and accessorised, happy that the app creators added that very useful little touch. Soon, the skyscrapers of the Central Business District (CBD) loomed over me. I decided to pay a visit to Yueh Hai Ching Temple or "temple of the calm sea".

Tucked in a corner off Raffles Place, this small temple has been standing here since the 1820s. It's now dwarfed by office towers, but back then it was the first port-of-call for migrants from the Chaoshan region of Guangdong, China, after their long sea voyage.

Figures from Chinese mythology stand on the temple's roof – these were only added after the temple underwent renovations in 2014. Among the deities the temple honours, *Yue Lao* (literally "old man under

the moon") is popular for those seeking love. A few photographs later, I set for Sims Drive to Marina Barrage before crossing over to the eastern side of the Kallang Basin.

Here, I found an amazing, and little-known, vantage point: from the eastern bank of the Kallang Basin, you can capture the Marina Bay Sands, Art Science Museum and the Singapore Flyer, with the CBD towers lined up behind them – all in one frame. Even the Geylang River and its wide park connector were unexpectedly pretty. Once home to boatyards and traders, the river is now a lined canal.

I also got to meet, by chance, the people who keep the waters clean. The Waterway Watch Society organises regular clean-ups, like this one with students from Damai Secondary School. Leaving the slick park connector and entering Geylang, with its five-foot-ways, small temples and labyrinth of back alleys, was like a trip back

in time.

I stopped at the junction of Lorong Bachok and Geylang Lorong 19 to see this shophouse, with its iconic painted plaster reliefs. A Sepoy sergeant in pre-World War II puttees and a Sikh guard adorn the front of this well-maintained 1929 shophouse. A strange menagerie of animals plays across its beautiful façade. That was my last stop before dinner and a train ride home – so far, so good. Tomorrow, I would test out the cycling routes that LOOP users have contributed to the database.

6 things you can see/do on cycling route 1: Queenstown, Raffles Place, Sims Drive:

1 Catch glimpses of Indonesia's Riau Islands from the 47th floor of SkyVille @ Dawson.

2 Check out the jogging path also on the 47th floor.

3 Visit the Yueh Hai Ching temple at the corner off Raffles Place, around since the 1820s.

4 From the eastern bank of Kallang Basin, take a photo of Marina Bay Sands, Art Science Museum, the Singapore Flyer, with office towers in the backdrop – all in one frame.

5 Enjoy the beautiful Geylang river and its wide park connector.

6 Stop by the junction of Lorong Bachok and Geylang Lorong 19 to admire a 1929 shophouse with its iconic painted plaster reliefs.

4 things you can see/do on cycling route 2: Punggol Park, Sungei Serangoon, Lorong Halus:

1 Enjoy the popular Punggol Park, with Pokémon hunters, #fitspo people and instagram boyfriends.

2 Check out the iconic Lorong Halus bridge and take a shot at the popular photo spot amongst the reed wetlands.

3 Pedal along Sungei Serangoon to reach Coney island with cooler air, filled with birdsong and sandy trails.

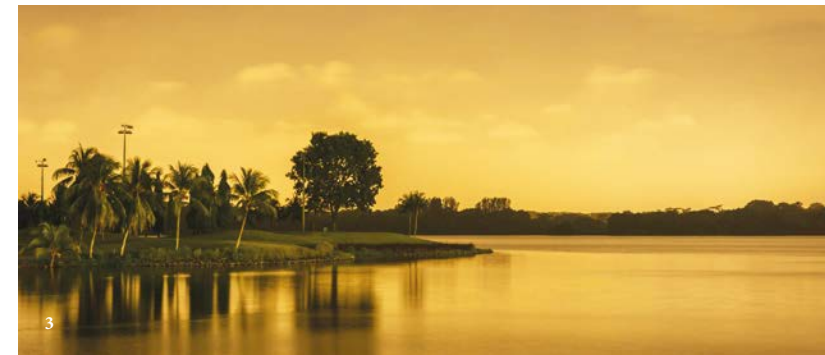
4 Encounter monkeys along the way via the western causeway.

Route 2



The air was much cooler here, thanks to the casuarina woodlands, and is filled with birdsong in the evening. The sandy main trail crunched under my tyres.

Route 3



The crowdsourced route test (route 2)

In addition to recommending routes based on coordinates you key in, LOOP has a library of cycling routes that have been crowdsourced from other cyclists. Users can rate and comment on these routes, and the app ranks them by popularity. I picked the “North Eastern Riverine Loop”, a 16-km route across park connectors in Sengkang and Punggol.

Starting at Punggol Park, I weaved around Pokémon hunters, #fitspo people and Instagram boyfriends. The route traced a portion of the length of Sungei Serangoon, a river dammed up to form a reservoir. Pandan plants along the park connector made for a pleasant ride. However, the popularity of the route was also its undoing – I found myself stuck in pedestrian and bicycle traffic. I decided to test the journey-tracking function of the app, so I turned off the suggested path into the quieter Lorong Halus.

Over the Lorong Halus bridge, the temperamental sky almost forced me to call off my trip. Further down from the bridge, the reed wetlands of Lorong Halus are a popular photo spot when dry. They serve as natural filters of water that flows out the now-disused Lorong Halus landfill into the Sungei Serangoon.

I pedalled down from the wetlands to emerge on Coney Island. The air was much cooler here, thanks to the casuarina woodlands, and is filled with birdsong in the evening. The sandy main trail crunched under my tyres. After cycling about 2.4 km around the island, I made my way off it via the western causeway while a troop of monkeys watched. And then it was back to the Sunday throng on the park connector. My final stop on the route: Punggol Point, to catch the last rays of sunlight dancing across the surface of the water.

The navigation test (route 3)

To test the navigation capabilities of LOOP, I decided I'd go on a night ride around somewhere unfamiliar: Yishun. I set the app for Khatib MRT and set off. Crossing Pulau Punggol Timur, I passed migrant workers as they made video and phone calls or brought groceries back to their dormitories. Directions on the app brought me to a long, lonely path along Seletar North Link, over to Punggol Barat Island and near Seletar Airport. I had no clue islands like that existed until I saw them marked out on the LOOP map.

I took a break to enjoy the strong breeze at Yishun Dam, where many families and couples had driven to sit in the quiet and take in the view. The navigation LOOP provided was surprisingly accurate so far, taking me around the area without much fuss. From the Dam, I followed the tree-lined Yishun Avenue 1 to Lower Seletar Reservoir Park.

Sidled alongside the reservoir, the golf course of Seletar Country Club makes for some surreal night photography. LOOP has no robotic voice squawking out directions, which I appreciated for not disturbing the quiet of the night. It did give me a clear path to follow, but didn't call me back to the route when I did wander off, which was often the case on these 3 routes.

As a photographer in search of new places and angles to shoot, the recommended routes feature let me plan (at least a little) in advance. And the fact that the app displayed nearby services – like the bike store on my first trip – meant that maybe, cycling might not only be for the Dutch and Lycra-clad.

Download LOOP on Google Play and iTunes.

3 things you can see/do on cycling route 3: Yishun, Seletar Country Club, Punggol Barat island:

1 Discover the lesser known Punggol Barat island.

2 Relax at Yishun Dam, where many families and couples sit and mingle.

3 Indulge in some surreal night photography at Seletar Country Club's golf course.

See

“I wanted to just draw places, people and memories that I have of Singapore. It makes me realise how much I miss home,” says artist Andre Wee who reconstructed a version of Singapore from memory in a whimsical piece.

Real and imagined, from Batman to Tin Tin and carpark wardens, 6 artists, 1 filmmaker and 5 photographers are doing more than just capturing poignant aspects of our evolving cityscape.

Drawing the city: batman and dragons

4 out of 33 artists reveal personal glimpses of Singapore's cityscape with their works exhibited along the sidewalks of the URA Centre celebrating Singapore's 50th birthday in 2015.

WRITER
Serene Tng



How did you get started?

It was my mum's drawing of a Power Ranger for my birthday and finding a stack of old (maybe hidden?) comic book superhero sketches by my dad that inspired me to pick up the pencil to draw. My time in the army has also helped. They used to say in Hendon Camp, "the only easy day was yesterday!"

Andre Wee

ARTIST, ILLUSTRATOR, VIRTUAL REALITY WORLD BUILDER

Tell us more about this piece. You have included Batman! Why?

I wanted to just draw places, people and memories that I have of Singapore. Without a fixed plan of the drawing in mind, there was room for nuance and play. I reconstructed a version of Singapore out of memory, as I had been away for some years, depicting both the real and factual with the imagined and playful. Working on this image has been therapeutic, making me realise how much I miss home! Batman is a reference I associate with Singapore. Whenever I walk pass Parkview Square, it reminds me of Gotham City, home to the comic character Batman. I always imagine Batman perched at the top. Not many people know its actual name but smile instantly with clarity when the 'Batman building' is mentioned.



Elliot

STUDENT, PATHLIGHT SCHOOL

Tell us more about this piece and what inspires you.

This is a Merlion. I used the Singapore flag colours of white and red, as well as blue to represent the sea, befitting of Singapore's origins as a trading port. I am inspired by anime and cartoons. Drawing helps me to relax but sometimes I just draw because I feel like it in the moment.



Don Low

ILLUSTRATOR AND DESIGNER (LET'S DRAW! SINGAPORE)

Why did you draw this particular location?

It's where I grew up. I walked this street to school every day when I was a student. Back then, the shophouses were mostly residential and they looked pretty old. My mum still lives nearby at Block 6 Everton Park, which sits on a mound overlooking this street. It was where I stood to draw this place, which explains the higher vantage point on this sketch. The white building on the left has remained fairly the same till now despite going through several refurbishments. I like how the current owner lined the five-foot-way corridor with pots of plants, giving the building a human touch against its white-washed walls.

Tell us more about yourself. What inspires you to draw?

I used to be an engineer but my love for art compelled me to become an artist. I am currently self-employed as a freelance illustrator and designer, working in both digital and traditional mediums. I also teach part-time as a drawing and painting instructor. Drawing provides me a means to express myself freely without having to find words for my thoughts or feelings. I like how my drawings can help record a moment in time in our ever-changing world.



Alice Lim

REGULATORY SPECIALIST (LET'S DRAW! SINGAPORE)

You drew a familiar scene from a HDB flat. What's the story there?

I wanted to share this gorgeous view from a nearby Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat in Marine Parade where I live. This is the view you enjoy while waiting for the lift. I slightly distorted it to include things that residents keep outside their flats like potted plants, clothes hangers and bicycles. It is a way of revealing a peek into people's lives.

What inspires you to draw?

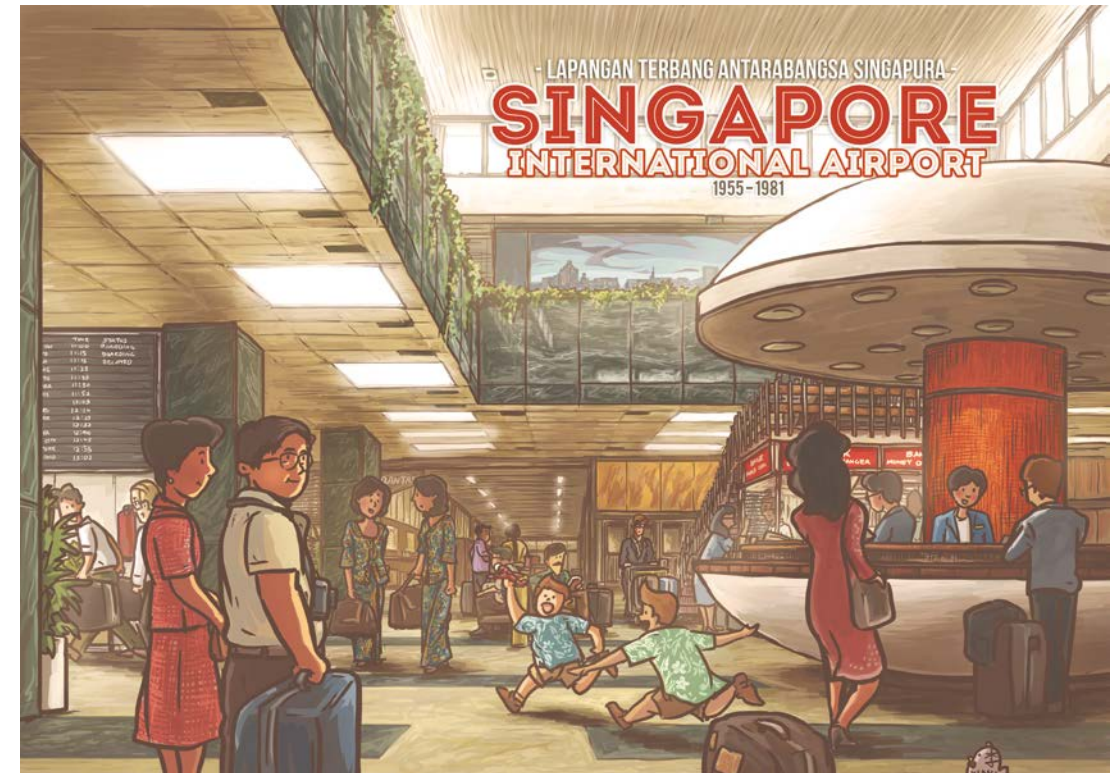
I just need a pen and some paper to start drawing. It is a great use of waiting or traveling time. I like to seek out interesting shop fronts, signages and buildings with unusual facades in historical areas. Details excite me because I love to capture everything I see. My philosophy is "If I can see it, I will draw it." I like it when people look at my sketches and comment how they had left out these details even though they had known the place all along.

If Tin Tin visits Singapore

Inspired by Tin Tin and Doraemon, illustrator Lee Xin Li draws us into an alternate universe of this island.

WRITER

Serene Tng



Illustrator Lee Xin Li's works draw you in with his imaginative layers of Singapore, blending the real and the dreamlike. Self-taught, he started producing illustrations in 2013. He has drawn iconic buildings from the former Kallang Airport, the National Theatre, to Tanjong Pagar Railway Station. Perhaps his most poignant work is of a jubilant Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the Commonwealth Close Estate, based on a photograph taken by photographer Larry Burrows from LIFE magazine.

We catch up with him on his drawings and how we can keep our heritage alive.

Why do you draw?

Drawing enables me to go deeper to rediscover colours, shapes and flavours; from the seemingly common *kueh* (local snack), to going on an imaginative journey back into an alternate Singapore where Neo Tiew remains a quaint little estate, or if Tanjong Pagar Railway Station became a high-speed railway station.

Who is your inspiration?

Herge's Adventures of Tin Tin and the Fujiko Fujio's Doraemon series.

Tell us about your favourite drawing.

It's Neo Tiew (image on the top right) – because it meant so much to me when I was a child. Neo Tiew is a small public housing estate in Lim Chu Kang built in 1979. The estate is now being used for military training. But back in those days, my mum and relatives used to work at the coffee shop there, selling drinks and food such as chicken rice. My dad would drive my siblings and I in his van to Neo Tiew where we would play at the circular playground. It has a small village feel, quite like Changi Village. It is a pity that the place is no longer inhabited after 2002. The drawing itself is an alternate universe of what Neo Tiew could have been.

How do we balance between managing change in our landscape and keeping our heritage alive?

We need to continue to be sensitive to the historical context and present circumstances beyond pragmatic needs and superficial applications. There is also a need for active and effective engagement with stakeholders like architects, historians and residents. I am envious of what I see in Kyoto in Japan or Yilan in Taiwan, but I don't think it is possible to simply take their model and plant it in Singapore. We need to develop our own unique model for Singapore that can accommodate both our development aspirations and create a landscape with a soul at the same time.



Physical spaces are more than shells

Artist Koh Hong Teng tells us why we need to tell stories about buildings and places.

WRITER
Serene Tng

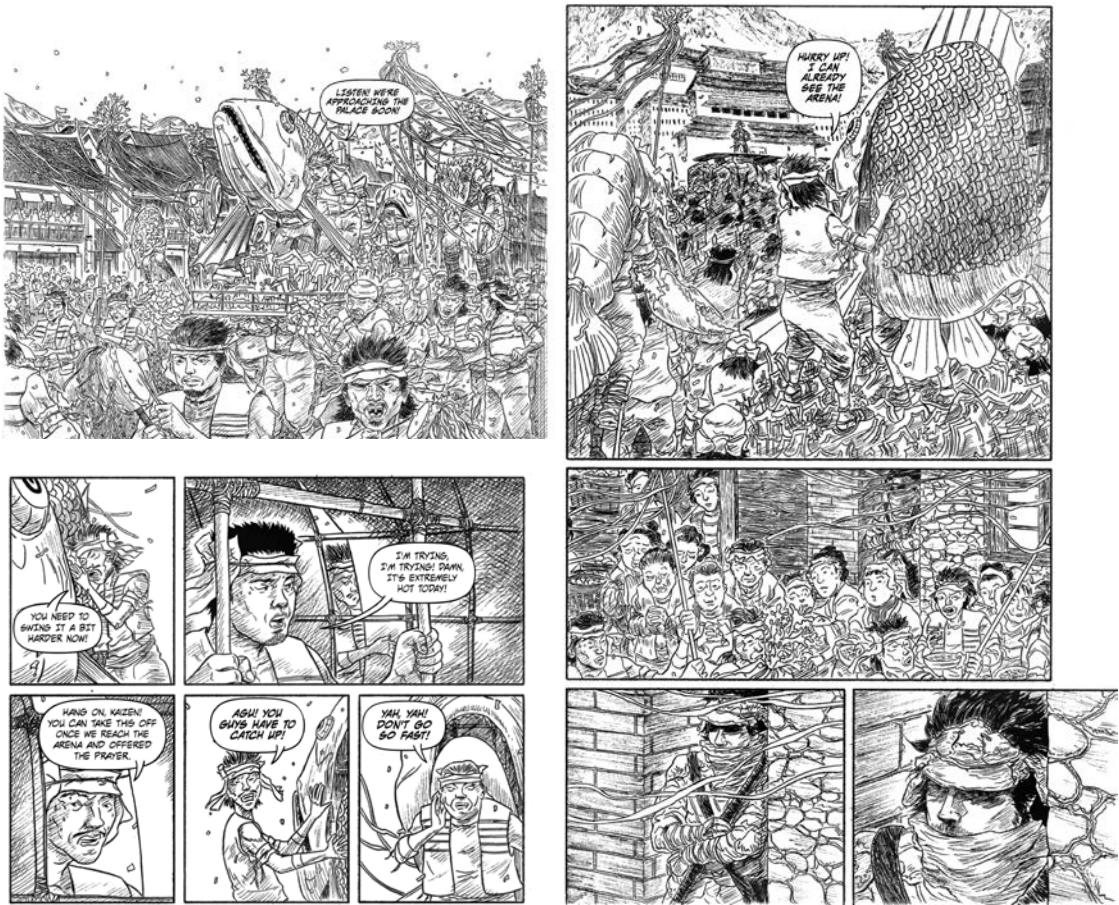


Image above:
Comic pages from
“The Prodigy”, with
writer Dave Chua.

Comic artist and illustrator Koh Hong Teng is known for tackling issues close to Singaporeans’ hearts from hawkers to generational gaps between parents and children. He combines fact and fiction in thought-provoking graphic forms that reflects our changing urban landscape. He talks about how the neighbourhood he grew up in influences his work and suggests that telling stories about our physical spaces can help us grow as a community.

Tell us about your growing up years.

I grew up in Kampong Chai Chee in the early 1970s, living in a big compound, in wooden houses with attap and zinc roofs. When I was 6, I moved to Bedok New Town where my family operated a provision shop. That was where I first came across a hawker centre as it was situated just next to the row of shophouses I lived in. It was there that I had the wonderful experience of eating Mee Rebus for the first time.

How has your neighbourhood influenced your work?

There was a tailor living next to our shophouse and I remembered playing hide and seek with his son and other kids in the neighbourhood. He had a full length window that displayed his clothes on half torso mannequins dressed with ‘洋服’ (yang fu), meaning Western-style clothes. There were other fascinating shops in the neighbourhood which was the major influence when I created the painting series “BLKS&NOS” depicting these unique shop spaces. Sadly, some of the shops I painted like the watch shop and television repair shop are no longer around.

What is one building you would like to bring back?

Definitely the old National Stadium. It holds wonderful memories for two of my passions: football and art. I remembered watching Au-Yeong Pak Kuan, Terry Pathmanathan and Malek Awab playing when my grandfather brought me to the stadium for the first time. As for art, it was the venue for the art competition hosted by Singapore Airlines that I took part in when I was in the second year of Junior College.

Architecture is the backdrop where things happen. What fascinates you about it?

When we look at an architecture, we see



imprints in time and space. We ask ourselves why a particular building was designed this way. We can also learn to identify the period when it was built by looking at the architectural style. It gives suggestions to the type of dwellers and users of this space and how they maximise their use and comfort. What is interesting to me is that these spaces are not just shells that encase us, but rather an extension of ourselves.

You say it’s important to tell stories about our buildings and places. Why?

It is important because it is not just your personal memory when you tell them, but it becomes a collective memory when others get to read them. And we can grow as a community only if we share and care for one another. So I would say the best way to get started is the willingness to share. Of what tools and techniques to employ are secondary. The important thing is the authenticity of your story and

Image above:
A drawing of the old
National Stadium
as remembered
by ex-national
footballer Malek
Awab, featured in
the book, “Building
Memories – People
Architecture
Independence”
and a No. 01-667
(BLKS&NOS Series),
Acrylic on Canvas,
900 x 1200 mm
(bottom)



Who is that guy in white?

How do you get people to remember forgotten places?
By taking selfies...of a different kind.

WRITER
Serene Tng



What started out on just a simple whim to 'cure boredom' has turned into a memorable Yesteryear project that has captured people's imagination about forgotten places in Singapore. A liberal arts student from the Nanyang Technological University, Sean Cham took 50 surreal photographs of abandoned places in 2015 as a tribute to Singapore turning 50. Why surreal? Sean places himself in all of the photos, dressed in all white from head to toe. He does everything by himself, from researching and selecting each place to planning and capturing each shot. The project has helped him gain a new appreciation for places and spaces as vessels of memories.

**Tell us about your 50th shot.
(image on the left)**

This is my grandparents' old Housing & Development Board block at Bukit Merah View. I was raised by my grandparents for the first 2 years of my life, spending my childhood at this very block. My time was spent playing games of chase and catch, and hide-and-seek with my brother and cousins along the corridors. I even remember riding my bike down the stairs and falling, resulting in a very bad swollen bump on my forehead. I started the Yesteryear project inspired by my grandparents' flat, wanting to recapture such places with vivid memories. It is apt that I am ending the series with this personal space. This single image sums up the entire series.

What are some of your most memorable shots?

The 41st image is one of them. This place has one of the last un-dammed rivers in Singapore. It used to be a kampung before the villagers were evicted in 2007. It is a mangrove forest and the villagers used to build their houses along the mudflats and river, rearing prawns and fish. It was quite an experience for me to navigate my way through in the mangroves, with my feet completely submerged in the mud. It felt like it took forever just to walk a few steps forward. It was slippery and there were shells, rocks, and crabs that made walking in the mud much harder. I had my toe stubbed in the process of taking the photo, standing in my own pool of blood as I viewed the images on my camera.



Any interesting stories behind the places?

Each place has its own unique story and contributes to the larger Singapore story. There was a shoot-out between the police and 2 convicts in the cemetery featured in the 44th photograph. Both convicts subsequently committed suicide with gunshots to their heads. As for the 31st shot, it was rumoured that the Japanese soldiers used prisoners of war as chess pieces; hence I recreated this in the photograph. And in my 43rd image, it was actually taken within the National University of Singapore campus, right behind the Science block. I doubt many students will know about that. This place witnessed the grotesque battle of Bukit Chandu where the Malay Regiment fought against the invading Japanese army.

So places to you are like vessels of memories.

The success of Singapore in transforming from a third-world country to a first-world metropolis in a mere span of over 50 years is an incredible one. We owe this success to our forefathers and the pioneer generation, without which we would not be able to enjoy gleaming skyscrapers, beautiful streets and greenery in our city today. We have progressed so much as a nation. But as with progress, there will be change. It is important for us to strike a balance between embracing change and preserving the old. Every single building, place, and space has its own unique story, a story forged by the people who live and work there, a story of the change it has undergone, a story of the events and happenings revolving around it.

Time travelling with Royston Tan

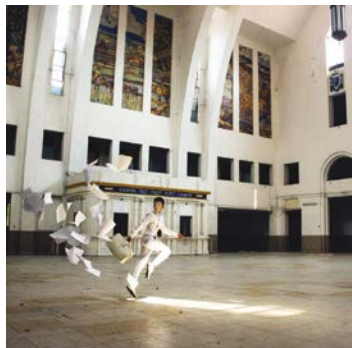
Filmmaker Royston Tan on panda-hunting and preserving memories.

WRITER
Vicki Yang



Filmmaker Royston Tan is charged with a mission: to document the passing of things before they become history.

His feature-length film, 3688 (2015), gives the much-maligned local parking attendants their day in the sun — for the first half of the film at least. Parking attendant Fei Fei, played by singer Joi Chua, is constantly undermined by a wily band of ‘summon aunties’, as parking attendants are known in local lexicon, as they patrol in the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood. Soon, the plot unfurls the uneven road to stardom as Fei Fei joins a singing competition. But it isn’t about the transformative dreams of a girl from the suburbs (or car park) that takes precedence on screen. The film’s preoccupation is with the forceful march of time — the reminiscences of Fei Fei’s dementia-ridden father, his ritual of hawking Rediffusion radios as a former door-to-door salesman and the ‘summon aunties’ retrenched and replaced with electronic gantries.



“A lot of people summarise the film as the passing of an era and the ownership of the past generation,” surmises Royston. One scene that found particular favour with the older generation was what he called ‘the simple sound design’ of the Rediffusion radio knob being turned by Fei Fei. “It triggered something in many people.”

Race against time

Included in this archive of sounds from long ago in 3688 is the yelling of the name, “Fong Fei Fei”, a reference to the famous Taiwanese songbird from the 1970s, known for her multitude of hats. More importantly, it’s yet another name hat-clad parking attendants are known by. It’s also used as a call in neighbourhoods to warn the unsuspecting public who are away from their cars, a trait of “a distinctive Singapore culture” to Royston.

The idea to create a film around a parking attendant haplessly against the march

of time came to Royston during a lunch at Maxwell Food Centre. “This parking attendant came in and everyone ran away very fast, screaming ‘Fong Fei Fei’ and all kinds of names, but she only went to the toilet to change into another outfit so that she can buy lunch!” says the filmmaker, almost desperately. “A lot of times, I find them sitting in the back alley, eating lunch where I like to go to shoot for my Instagram. If not, they will be getting stares and all kinds of verbal abuse. I thought: “they do have a story to tell.”

Co-written with writer Lim Fong Wei, saw the shadowing of 2 parking attendants to observe their day-to-day encounters. That was when Royston realised that these female street wardens were being replaced by machines and men. “Those we spoke to had the attitude of ‘let’s take one day at a time’. A lot of things were changing, so I thought I have to archive this as soon as possible, don’t wait already!”

This ‘don’t wait already’ phrase is

something Royston repeats constantly as we chat and chronicle his filmography. From documentaries of old landmarks and suburban shops in Old Places (2010) and Old Romances (2012), to a short film on the oldest Hokkien opera troupe like Sin Sai Hong (2006), one might infer that Royston’s filmography is deeply entrenched in nostalgia. However, he doesn’t shoot with rose-tinted lens. To the filmmaker, these works aim to highlight one’s roots for those who have forgotten.

“I cannot fight the change but I can document these things before they are gone,” says Royston. “Right now, people in Singapore are very desensitised, like it’s better not to feel. But when you stop feeling, that’s the moment you start dying. That’s why I’m doing this.”

The village boy

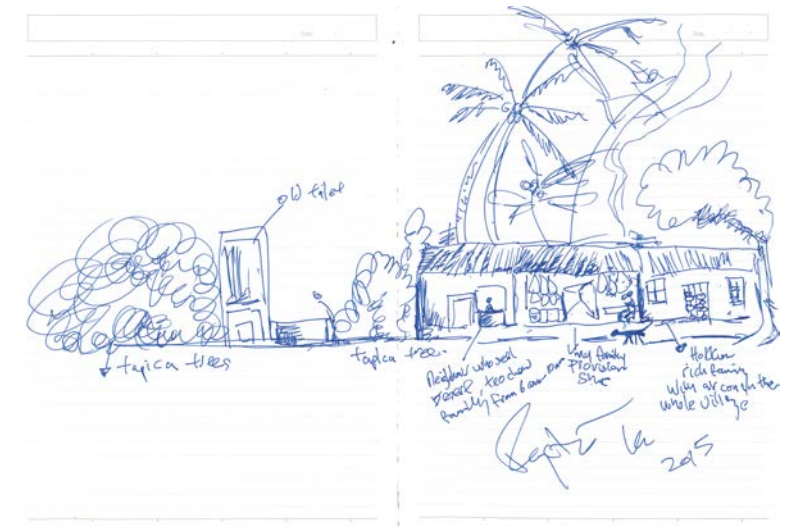
The loss of places is something Royston feels most keenly about, in part due to a consequential episode in his childhood

when the 7-year-old left the kampong life of Lorong Kinchir, today Lorong Chuan in the Serangoon district, to HDB life in the early 1980s.

“I was from the transitional period — the last generation to stay in the kampong, the transition from non-digital to digital,” says the filmmaker. “It was traumatising for me to move. The air was different, the people would not talk to each other, the doors were always closed. I grew up with fresh water from the well, and when there was water coming from the tap, it felt very strange,” he recalls.

From one generation to another, the reminiscences of kampong life have been passed down verbally (aside from a visit to Pulau Ubin or Lorong Buangkok), so I ask him to draw the village map from his memory.

Under a pen dripping ink, the lines of the houses and trees blur into each other, but Royston is only too happy to go into the details of the sketch (image below) from left to right: the communal toilet that was very scary to visit in the dark (“sometimes got pervert”); the Teochew neighbour who sold *tau suan* and other desserts with the use of fresh tapioca from the trees around; Royston’s family provision shop fronted by tables surrounded by old uncles drinking beer, “just chatting





with my mom and watching over us to make sure we don't run out to the main road"; the "very rich family" next door whose house was "very clean and there is air-con inside" and where the neighbours would crowd in to watch television, often American sitcoms that young Royston hardly understood, but "when they laugh, I just laugh lor."

"This is the environment we grew up in. Wah, I really miss the old days," concludes Royston wistfully. Today, what's left of his kampong is part of the Central Expressway and an empty field.

Awakening memories

Perhaps in line with his desire to document the evolution of public spaces that remain personal to himself and others, it's fitting that another past project, 50 First Kisses, brings people back to the places where they had their first kiss, romantic or familial. "The whole idea was to reconnect people through memories, and to go back to the same place even if the environment has changed, but the people will still be in the same pose," he explains.

In preparation for the film, Royston and his production team had to hunt down the exact spots where the kisses occurred and where the submitted photographs were taken. While the most popular spots were Toa Payoh Town Garden (now Toa Payoh Town Park), Changi Airport, and the Singapore Zoo, trawling through the other identified landscapes was a momentous effort, which Royston recalls with an exaggeratedly pained look.

"We had wonderful stories, such as the social worker who doesn't talk to his dad very much, but they had a picture at Haw Par Villa with a panda in it, and it was so difficult to find the panda! It took us 2 weeks to find, and when we found it, my hair stood up," recounts Royston.

"Even as we are talking now, every moment is a part of history," Royston reminds his audience, myself included. "That's the thing I really learnt from doing 3688. What are the pivotal things you will remember? Who do you think is the person who will dance with you when you lose your memory?"

Serangoon Road is not just 'Little India'

4 photographers and 30 students delved deeper to peel away the rich layers of this historic enclave in a year-long documentation project.

WRITER
Justin Zhuang



Image above: Photo by Chia Aik Beng

It's not just a place where foreign workers and people of Indian heritage go to hang out. This area has a lot of historical architecture, much of which is not Hindu or Indian," says Darren Soh, on capturing this iconic road as the lead photographer of the project, "DOCUMENTING: Serangoon Road", initiated by URA in partnership with National Youth Achievement Award Council's Young Photographers Network.

The Serangoon Road area is associated with familiar names like Tekka and since 1989 is also known as "Little India" where the historic conservation district is located. Seeking to capture and document the more intimate and lesser-known landmarks, spaces and life of one of Singapore's oldest roads, Darren Soh, together with 3 other photographers Bernice Wong, Philipp Aldrup and Chia Aik Beng mentored and guided 30 tertiary students from 16 schools from 2016 to 2017.

The 4 photographers talk about Little India and the project.

On why Serangoon Road is special

Darren : As a sociology student, I spent a fair bit of time talking to foreign migrant workers who frequented the area on the weekends. My studio was also located in Rowell Road, the heart of the more colourful part of the area and I have fond memories of the food, both Muslim and Chinese, plus the late night shopping at Mustafa Centre when I needed supplies for work.

Bernice : I started going down to Rowell Road every week when I was in university after I chanced upon a volunteering opportunity with a migrant worker non-government organisation, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), which offered a soup kitchen there. The soup kitchen served workers who were having issues with their employers and those who were injured, amongst others. Apart from administering meals

to these workers, I've had many hours of conversations with a good handful of them. Over time, I picked up basic Bengali from them and eventually went to Bangladesh a couple of times to visit some of their families and to produce a short film.

Aik Beng : Serangoon Road has a colourful past and still remains one of the most vibrant districts. My grandfather, a taxi driver, used to bring me there when I was a kid in the mid-1970s. I have fond memories of the many diverse cultures of the district.

Lessons from the project

Darren : It is really more colourful and interesting than common knowledge makes it out to be — the diversity in Serangoon Road far exceeds the stereotype of it being an "Indian" enclave — is there really such a thing anyway?

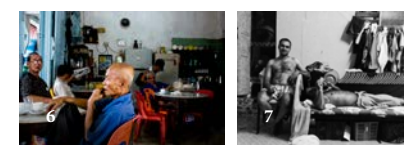
Philipp : Photographing it years back taught me framing seemingly disorderly scenes, making sense of confusion, and bringing a certain order to randomness. Reviewing the students' photographs showed me the many other perspectives one can look at the area and how they as beginners approach the site in often similar ways as I did back then: sometimes distanced and shy, helpless and insecure, sometimes courageous and straight forward, unbiased and fully immersed.

3 must-see places

Aik Beng : The area around Jalan Besar, Race Course and Sungei Roads. Time stands still in these pockets of the district.

Tips on capturing the soul of a place

Philipp : Be patient. Don't rush. Shoot less, feel more. Listen. Stay and look around. Hang out, chat with people, eat and drink. Make friends. Visit it again — and again.



Images above: 1,7,10 - Chia Aik Beng; 2,3,6 - Philipp Aldrup; 5 - Bernice Wong; 4,8,9 - Darren Soh

Think

“It is humbling to see these creatures at work, dealing with problems that humans have created. Nature seems to have a solution for every problem if we only know where to look,” says Ng Jia Quan, co-founder of Circento, who advocates the use of insects to grow better quality vegetables.

Whether farmers, planners, architects or just passionate citizens, we are inspired by these champions who are improving our neighbourhoods and making us rethink the design of physical spaces and our lifestyles.



Lessons from Tiong Bahru's block 55

What can a humble block teach us about our past and future?

WRITER
Ruthe Kee

PHOTOGRAPHER
Donn Tan

Block 55 is the first of 20 blocks built by the Singapore Improvement Trust in 1936, in one of Singapore's first housing estate. Even after 80 years, this ordinary block continues to offer valuable lessons and stories for our future.

Professor Lily Kong, provost, Lee Kong Chian chair professor of Social Sciences of Singapore Management University and directors of URA's conservation planning and conservation management departments, Tan Huey Jiun and Kelvin Ang reflect on what it takes to retain a sense of place in an iconic neighbourhood like Tiong Bahru.

Block 55 was part of 20 blocks built before World War II.

Huey Jiun : The Singapore Improvement Trust borrowed ideas from British new towns like Stevenage, Harlow and Crawley. They created 3-storey, low-rise flats with public spaces in between, and these had instantly recognisable design elements such as special corners that form a gateway on the streets. Block 55 - the first block built is one such example. It is easily recognisable when you head down Tiong Bahru Road. Its angled front serves as a marker that you have entered the estate.



The architecture provides a framework for social life to happen.

Tell us more about its architecture.

Huey Jiun : The architectural style is that of streamline moderne, a subset of the art deco movement. Inspired by the technology and speed of modern travel before World War II, you can see elements of automobiles, trains and aeroplanes on this building. Unlike the lavish and ostentatious decoration of the earlier incarnations of Art Deco, the streamline moderne style is characterised by clean, curved shapes, rounded corners, long horizontal and vertical lines. Some key design elements served functional purposes like the balconies. They serve as a good space to transit between the hot external climate and the cooler internal living space; they also create some kind of interest. The tinted green glass is also used strategically in brighter lit areas to cut glare, alongside its clear counterparts in dimmer spots.

What is one lesser known story about the blocks?

Lily : There is a certain mythology developed by residents around the strength of these buildings. Rarely damaged by bombing from the war and some find it hard to nail things into the

wall – residents attribute this to the strength, built from good ole english materials. The buildings were actually made of cement and strong bricks from local earth, but like many today, the connotations made by the local storeowners and residents persist.

What is the significance of the layout?

Lily : The very first sort of layout showed small open public spaces where people could sit and chat and recognise faces... the estate was built precisely with that as the planning principle from British new towns. And that enables a sense of familiarity, a sense of serendipitous encounter, and therefore relationships develop over time. For the older residents, this sense of community is still there in terms of familiarity so a lot of that was built over the years... the sense of trust, the sense of being able to walk into a store and say “sorry I forgot to bring money, can I just *ohtang* (pay later)?” For years that was a reality for people who walked into the provision shop and say I take first and pay later. That sense of trust and community was very strong.

Kelvin : Simply by walking past the flat shops every day you have a chance to encounter your neighbours and be friends. This is quite an important planning lesson this estate has provided. Even the five-foot ways. The architecture provides a framework for social life to happen.

Businesses change over time. How do you manage this sense of place?

Lily : There’s a certain organic nature to the businesses here. If you go to the market now, some of the store holders are those who were laying out produce on the roadside, who were running away from the *tehgu* (police) and when the market was set up and built, they moved into the market. The organic nature of the business having grown through time is part of that thread of continuity, that source of community. The chicken stall holder used to sell chickens and would lay out her produce on the planks next door. When the *tehgu* comes, the then-boyfriend would help her gather her chickens. The romance grew from there and they still sell chicken to this day. The husband is in his 80s and wife in her 70s and some of their children help them in the business. The organic community of the days gone by has a thread of continuity in the shops here.

Huey Jiun : The old user, the old stalls, they are retained. They continue their business in the day. There’s continuity. Sometimes the old stallholders move out and all that; we’ll be a bit nostalgic about it. But sometimes people who come in also value these people and let them continue their business.

Kelvin : The critical part about sense of place is when you know who the boss is, and you will interact with him on a more or less day-to-day basis. Say, for example, this Tiong Bahru Bakery is very nice, of course I love the coffee and the cake, but it’s not an everyday thing for us here. So between a local coffeeshop and this, what is more important is the local coffeeshop. The residents, in seeing re-gentrification, or the cycle of it, have made a point that the local businesses are important, and we have gone out to try to find solutions. An example is the *yong tau foo* stall which sells *yong tau foo* in the daytime and pizzeria at night – this suggests a possible workable model for the business to sustain itself. The Krabi coffeeshop is another example — daytime meepok and kopi and night time Japanese restaurant — this was something that the community went out of their way to try and matchmake the businesses, and it has been successful so far.

4 key elements of block 55:

1 Each corner of various blocks have a different design to distinguish from one another. Block 55 has concrete sunshades on its façade as a simple design feature.

2 It has handmade wooden door frames and metal frames that are 80 years old.

3 The block has climate-friendly features like the balconies that serve as a buffer from the heat and the sunshades cut out the glare.

4 The green windows are a rare feature that help create a visual sense of coolness and provide privacy.

Images: Tan Huey Jiun, URA director for conservation planning shares lessons learnt from Tiong Bahru’s block 55 (top left). Business owners like Rodney Goh, a third-generation owner of provision shop Pin Piau Kay & Co. (top right) and Kenny Leck, owner of BooksActually (opposite right) continue to keep Tiong Bahru thriving. Professor Lily Kong shares a photo of the husband and wife chicken stall holders (opposite).



Lily : That's not to say that the newer eateries cannot develop that kind of relationship with the people here and with the people outside, but it requires a certain level of constancy and investment of time for human relations to develop.

Huey Jiun : It does keep a certain familiarity for the people who stay and visit here, so from the last time that you come back here some things might have changed, the shopkeepers might have changed, but you still know this is Tiong Bahru, because of the buildings. The architecture and environment like what Lily says are the enabler for new relationships to form.



Why is it important to retain the architecture?

Huey Jiun : These 20 blocks and another 36 shophouses were gazetted for conservation in 2003 because of the importance of Tiong Bahru being the very first housing estate and because of its social architecture. By conserving the area, URA can then guide the works done on the buildings, ensuring the distinguishing features of the buildings' façades are kept so as to retain the identity of the area, allowing the estate to continue to have its sense of space and meaning for generations to come.

Lily : I still think it's wonderful that we're keeping some of this old architecture, and it's great. The thing about the green textured glass at block 55 is it's part of my memory of Tiong Bahru, and when you see that they've all changed, you kind of think "something's different, something's changing." No one element is the element to kind of say, "this is terrible, I'm never coming back again; it's not the same." But it's a different combination for different people. Sometimes it's the old stallholders, sometimes it's the food they're selling or what they're selling, sometimes it's the textured glass. It's a combination of things that's part of our holistic experience.



Huey Jiun : Some of this architecture also embodies a lot of the learning points and experiences for the future, because they're sustainable buildings with the balconies being a buffer zone. Some of these things bear very good lessons as we continue to design for the future. People lived in these buildings in the past even without air-conditioning and natural light would come in to light up the space because of the air well. These are lessons for us to repeat and learn from.

For more information and stories on other historic districts and buildings, go to URA's conservation portal, ura.sg/consportal.



Designing for communities

Enabling Village's people-centric design has been bringing communities together.

WRITER
Justin Zhuang

Where Timothy Ang used to work in Jurong Point, there were times when he couldn't get to the office because the lift broke down. He also recalls only seeing "buildings and walls". Today, the studio manager, who is a wheelchair user works out of a ground level office next to the housing estate of Lengkok Bahru. Not only is he surrounded by greenery, he connects with others like himself and the larger community at this one-stop hub.

Image above:
The repurposed sewage pipe is capturing people's imagination being used as seating booths or some try to contort themselves within.
© Patrick Bingham-Hall.



Images: Steps have been replaced by ramps, with the gradient gentle enough for both manual wheelchairs and motorised scooters (above). © Edward Hendricks. The open space between the Village Green and the Hive at The Enabling Village is reactivated as a garden yard (opposite). © Patrick Bingham-Hall.

Welcome to the Enabling Village – an inclusive space combining education, work, training, retail and lifestyle that connects people with disabilities with society.

Located in the mature Redhill neighbourhood, the project is a successful demonstration of rejuvenation and community building within a housing estate. An adaptive reuse of the previous Bukit Merah Vocational Institute built in the 1970s, the property was taken over by the Ministry of Social and Family Development, repurposed and opened in December 2015 as the Enabling Village. It is now the home of SG Enable, an agency dedicated to enabling people with disabilities to connect with like-minded partners and stakeholders.

Breaking down barriers

“Not just a place for people with disabilities, we wanted the village to also be a new heart and hub for the community, breaking down barriers,” says the lead architect Phua Hong Wei from architectural firm WOHA who led the 22-month project to transform this sprawling compound consisting of 6 blocks. This meant removing major segregations and ensuring the site is well integrated with its surroundings. A tall green fence came down. Multiple entry points were created. Drivers can come in through a safer spot along Lengkok Bahru, visitors can walk in from Redhill MRT fully sheltered by covered linkways while residents from the adjacent Redhill Close can enter through a new entrance

that features a garden shaded by majestic saga trees that have stood there for decades. “People can also take a short cut through the village from one end to the (neighbouring) school and precincts. It’s not just a destination but has also become part of people’s daily commute,” adds Hong Wei.

Within the compound itself, a kampong feel with more wild-looking landscape seeks to draw people closer to nature and to each other. It is designed together with landscape studio Salad Dressing. “We wanted the village’s environment to be more accessible with Singapore’s indigenous flora and fauna,” says Hong Wei. The village’s ponds surrounded by edible plants such as pandan, lemon grass and banana have attracted dragonflies, frogs and even rare hornbills. And while residents have released fishes into ponds, others slow down to enjoy the surroundings when they go around the village. “I overheard a mother sharing a special moment with her little boy, pointing out the fishes and unique plants,” says Hong Wei. “That was a great moment for us.”

Reimagining everyday spaces

In addition to ensuring smoother and more seamless movements around the site for those with disabilities, WOHA also injected more public spaces to encourage greater interactions amongst visitors and users. From seating booths to play spaces for preschoolers and an outdoor amphitheatre for events, these spaces cater for both buzz and quiet moments. “One of the main things we look at is how everyday spaces and linkages can be reimagined to be useful, meaningful, accessible and inclusive. The more meeting points you create, the more opportunities there is for people to meet and interact. That sort of interaction is what creates a village and really opens it up to connect people with disabilities with the rest of society,” says Hong Wei.



He adds: “The place is not about how it looks, but how it works. A lot of people have come to the village to use it differently... and in doing so, they share and bond with common memories.” Children have been seen doing their homework at the amphitheatre, and a set of repurposed sewage pipe used as seating booths underneath the amphitheatre have become popular with visitors who contort themselves to fit in or imagine being sucked into them. The Enabling Village’s ecosystem of businesses and services geared towards people with disabilities has also enabled users like Timothy to expand his network and make new friends. His colleague Jessie Ong likes the village for its convenience, and has participated in events and parties organised by others like the Stroke Support Station located in a neighbouring block.

In their citation for this project, the jury of the President’s Design Award wrote that the “Enabling Village is a first of its kind and represents a natural evolution of place-making, where the redesign of the space is driven by the needs of the users. It is a demonstration of how designers can build a better world through design, by not designing.” For its thoughtful creation of a social space that breaks down many barriers and brings together communities, the Enabling Village was awarded the President’s Design Award in 2016.



Making streets safer for the disabled

Debra Lam, co-founder of Society Staples, wants to create more conversations and wider sidewalks for people with disabilities.

WRITER
Chin Wei Lien

PHOTOGRAPHER
Donn Tan

Debra is the co-founder of Society Staples, a social enterprise that hopes to raise awareness for people with disabilities (PwDs) and make the streets safer for them. “We see PwDs and other marginalised groups as staples of society – ‘staples’ as in essentials, like rice and noodles,” she explains. “And just like staplers in stationery, we strive to be a binding force that ‘staples’ fragmented and forgotten groups into one inclusive society.”

In March 2017, Society Staples brought these groups into the spotlight. Together with URA and the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD), a special street party was organised: it’s the first-ever road closure with PwDs at the forefront. This is part of URA’s Streets for People, an initiative that transforms streets into pedestrian-friendly public spaces.

Peng Nguan Street in Tiong Bahru was closed off for disability-friendly sports and games such as bowling, flea markets, and craft displays by SPD’s artisans. PwDs and the able-bodied can embark on specially curated heritage trails around the neighbourhood, too, with pit stops at cafés, specialty shops and even an air raid shelter. Debra’s personal favourite? An oversized game of Jenga, which, according to her, was a hit at previous Society Staples events.

Getting personal

Society Staples was founded by Debra Lam and Ryan Ng in March 2015, and it had come from a deeply personal core: both Debra and Ryan have siblings who live with disabilities. “Growing up, I was given a lot of opportunities as a privileged kid in primary and secondary schools,” recalls Debra. She participated in foreign exchange programmes and held various leadership positions. However, the same could not be said for her two brothers, who have autism. “They were bullied, left out of social events, and people often classified them as strange and awkward.”

Debra’s mum constantly worries about them. “Will they have jobs like everyone else? Can they live independently? Who’s going to take care of them when she passes away? These questions flood her mind,” she says. Ryan shares similar sentiments. He grew up with a brother with Williams syndrome, a developmental disorder that is characterised by mild to moderate intellectual disability. When he saw a local news story in 2011 about a teacher who made demeaning remarks to a student with special needs, Ryan felt compelled to do something about it.

One step at a time

Debra believes that the city as a whole has to change and embrace PwDs. “Our infrastructure has improved over the years, now we have accessible lifts at every single MRT station and more buses equipped with wheelchair ramps,” she notes. “But we could do with wider pedestrian walks for wheelchairs, for instance!” Programmes such as the Streets for People are good first steps on the path of real change. “Achieving inclusivity begins with every individual.”

For more information on Streets for People, go to ura.sg/streetsforpeople





From cooking to harvesting flies

Meet Ng Jia Quan, Singapore's insect farmer at Citizen Farm.

WRITER
Jennifer Eveland

PHOTOGRAPHER
Chee Boon Pin

Insects are the unsung heroes of nature, says Ng Jia Quan (far right in the above image), who is overseeing the entire insect operations inside a small netted enclosure in Citizen Farm, one of Singapore's largest urban farms, located amidst a residential estate in Queenstown.

The farm advocates a closed-loop approach to farming that marries natural elements with technologies to grow high quality produce in a sustainable way. "A lot of people are freaked out when I tell them that I am an insect farmer," says Jia Quan. The insect farm is by Circento, where Jia Quan is a co-founder of. He is supporting Citizen Farm's closed-loop approach by using insects to produce organic fertiliser used to grow better quality produce.



What kind of flies are these?

Black soldier flies.

What do they eat?

We feed them leftover food – fruits and vegetables that are imported but have spoiled en route or are bakery remnants that are the by-products of factory productions.

The food, once eaten, is digested by the larvae, broken down and passed out as waste that is a 100 percent natural nutrient-rich compost fertiliser. This fertiliser provides the nutritional life source for Citizen Farm's produce.

Why use insects?

It's more sustainable. Insects are actually very valuable and useful in our ecosystem and it allows us to create fertilisers using a more natural process.

What is a common misconception about these insects?

That the larvae are pretty gross, dirty and unsafe to work with, but they are cleaner than what you think they would be. They don't bite, there's not much smell and they don't spread diseases.

What led you to this profession?

I used to be a chef in a fine French restaurant where I became curious about the origins of ingredients. I went on to do farming in a facility that grows plants using hydroponics. But I eventually found that my greatest interest lies in exploring the use of more natural fertilisers and understanding the role insects can play in farming.

What is the grossest thing about your job?

Seeing the amount of food that we waste and how we treat food, allowing it to rot without putting it to good use. There is so much waste.

What do you love about your job?

Seeing nature at work. Insects and microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi are the unsung heroes of nature. They are often stigmatised as unhygienic, but they actually play an important role in the ecosystem.

Visit Citizen Farm, 60 Jalan Penjara

Web www.citizenfarm.com.sg

Do

“It wasn’t as tough as I thought,” says writer Michelle Ng who took on the challenge of living waste free for a week.

There are many ways we can get started as active citizens. Here are tips and suggestions from those who tried it.



3 ways to live waste free

Writer Michelle Ng challenged herself to live waste free for a week.

WRITER / PHOTOGRAPHER
Michelle Ng

In 2015, 8.28 million kg of waste was disposed in a day. At the current rate of disposal, our only landfill at Pulau Semakau will run out of space by 2035, less than 20 years' time.

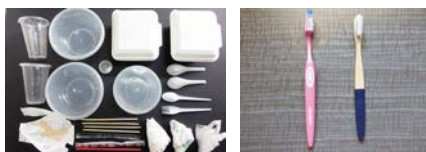
So I challenged myself to live zero-waste for a week, with a 3-prong strategy:

- Stop using single-use disposable items
- Reuse items and recycle everything else
- Only turn to the bin as a last resort

Here's how my week went.

Single-use disposable items

The first thing I did was to look into my rubbish bin – to reduce consumption (and therefore waste production), I needed to know what I was consuming the most. It's filled with mostly single-use disposable items that I've never given a second thought to, such as styrofoam and plastic takeaway containers, plastic bags, coffee cups, tissue paper, and mineral water bottles.



The most popular tip on *Journey to Zero Waste Life in Singapore* (a local Facebook group) is to swap these common single-use items out with reusable alternatives. After rummaging through my kitchen cabinets, I managed to find glass containers, tote bags, a glass coffee tumbler, handkerchief and a reusable water bottle. I even found a biodegradable bamboo toothbrush to replace my current plastic one – bamboo is one of nature’s most sustainable resources as it is carbon neutral and can be grown in both tropical and temperate environments without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilisers.

For the entire week, I got my morning Joe in my coffee tumbler. My usual barista didn’t bat an eyelid when I presented the tumbler – she told me that at least 2 people come in with their tumblers on an average day, a reassuring sign. At the hawker centre, however, the drinks stall uncle was slightly more hesitant. But he eventually caved and poured my *kopi o* (black coffee) into the tumbler, making a “saving the planet?” joke while he was at it.

The takeaway containers came in handy even while grocery shopping at the wet market. Instead of stuffing fresh meat and vegetables into plastic bags, I handed the stall owners my containers for them to pack and carried them in a waterproof tote bag. Just like that, I eliminated 5 to 6 plastic bags that I would have typically used on an average trip to the market.

Reuse and recycle

If you do bring home those plastic bags from the market, reuse them. Reusing items can be as simple as using an old piece of clothing such as rags for cleaning at home or buying your takeaway office lunch in used – but clean – containers.

Eugene Tay, executive director of Zero Waste Singapore, notes a trend of fewer

people cooking at home. He says most of us tend to *tapao* (take away) food from the hawker centre, and that usually comes in non-recyclable styrofoam boxes or plastic tubs. Indeed, according to the National Environment Agency (NEA), food packaging accounts for 11 percent of plastic waste – with plastic being the number one contributor to waste in Singapore – and 14 percent of paper and cardboard waste generated in 2015.

To alleviate that, whenever I had to take away my meals, I brought a container along to cafés and hawker centres – not even the saltiest hawker at Maxwell Food Centre brushed me off. I also turned down the flimsy plastic cutlery, as I kept a set of stainless steel forks and spoons I brought from home at my office desk.

At home, all you need is a little creativity to repurpose even the most mundane household item. Instead of buying new storage boxes, I cleaned out the residual wax from old scented candle jars and used them to hold my makeup brushes. These candle jars not only look pretty on my vanity table, they also get a new lease of life after use.

Sort recyclables from general waste

In 2015 and 2016, Singapore recycled 61 percent of its rubbish, yet the recycling rate of households remains relatively low at 19 percent, a stagnant number since 2005 till now. This is despite the fact that there are huge blue recycling bins to collect paper, plastic, metal and glass in every HDB estate – they’re part of the National Recycling Programme, which was implemented in 2001.

Eugene hopes to make recycling a way of life. Which is why Zero Waste Singapore has launched a campaign, Let’s Recycle Together, which was rolled out on social media in March 2017. “This campaign aims to encourage more HDB residents to use the blue recycling bins in their

neighbourhoods, and to use it right to reduce contamination of the recycling bins,” Eugene says. In its next phase, the campaign is moving into community engagement at selected neighbourhoods through posters, signages, door-to-door visits and roadshows.

Recycling at home is easy if you’ve set up for it. I carved out a little recycling corner to separate recyclable items from general waste. In countries like Japan where recycling is a way of life, recyclables are sorted not just into three basic categories of plastic, paper and glass but up to nine different categories such as clear glass bottles, brown glass bottles, steel cans and aluminum cans.

Thankfully the National Recycling Programme doesn’t require us to sort the items by material, so I collected things like empty toilet rolls, unwanted letters and brochures, emptied and rinsed shampoo and sauce bottles, and brought them to the recycling bin at the end of the week. Out of sight, but peace of mind.

The takeaway

I’ll be honest, though: living a zero waste lifestyle is easy only if you’re willing to put in the effort. And despite making a conscious effort, I inevitably still created waste, such as snack packaging, cling film, paper towels, facial wipes and plastic straws that I forgot to refuse before it was too late.

But what I did save was 5 coffee cups, 5 plastic food containers, close to 15 plastic bags and a handful of mineral water bottles – all just in 1 week. Scaled up, that would mean I’d discard 520 coffee cups and plastic tubs, 780 plastic bags and about 150 water bottles in a year. And that’s from just 1 person. Imagine what we’d save if we all took part in a waste-free lifestyle for just a day a week.





How to grow herbs at home

A novice gardener puts her green thumbs to the test by growing her own herb garden. Here are 4 things she learnt from the process.

WRITER / PHOTOGRAPHER
Nicole-Marie Ng

As an avid home cook, it's always been a dream of mine to have my very own herb garden. Pesto made with a fresh batch of basil each week, chilli to add spice to any dish, and lemon balm to julienne and sprinkle on top of grilled salmon – these are just some of the recipes I'd be able to do with my own herbs.

Inspired by the urban farming movement in Singapore, I was determined to make my dream a reality. If people could grow fruits and vegetables in their apartments, a small 30 by 15 inch planter filled with herbs seemed achievable enough. So I bought the necessary materials from a supply store and supermarket, planted my seeds and waited for a month – here's what I learnt along the way.

1. Don't start with seeds

It sounds counter-intuitive, but if you're new to gardening, ditch the seeds. They probably won't make it past the seedling stage – that's when the seed germinates into a sprout. Plus, growing your herbs from seeds is also more time-consuming than buying the adult plants from the nursery and replanting them at home.

Take my experience as a cautionary tale. I attempted to grow basil, chilli padi and lemon balm from its seeds. The basil and lemon balm started growing after a week, but I only saw seedlings for the chilli padi after a month, and even then, only 4 shoots sprouted despite planting over 15 seeds. Replanting the herbs from adult shoots also means that you'll be able to taste the herbs before deciding if it's right for your garden.

Save yourself the time. Trust me on this.

2. Build a scarecrow

Leaving the herbs out on my balcony not only meant exposing them to the elements, but making them easy pickings for the mynas and pigeons that scout the area.

My basil seeds were the first to grow and matured after 2 weeks, and then I started noticing clusters of the leaves disappearing day after day. My first thought was that the herbs had died – but when I caught a bird poking around the garden one afternoon, it dawned on me that it's these feathered frenemies that were making a snack of my plants.



To prevent the same thing from happening to your herbs, line your garden with metal spikes so that the birds don't have a comfortable place to land and peck at your hard-grown greens. I decided to go all-out and built my own scarecrow with simple materials I found at Daiso.

3. Harvest regularly

In the early stages, I found that harvesting my herbs regularly encouraged better growth. New shoots would sprout up from the cuts I made when harvesting the herbs, and the younger leaves are more tender and milder in flavour, making them the perfect garnish to any dish.

4. Don't give up (or stick to lemon balm)

I almost did.

The herbs took a while to grow, and this was after a lot of trial and error, too. Experiment with different plants and seeds to see what works for your schedule and environment. My chilli and basil plants didn't manage to grow well, but the lemon balm did – so I'd recommend sticking to that. You can even harvest them after a month or so.

Thank you

to the countless individuals, volunteers, architects, photographers and others who help us explore and appreciate our city anew and who show us that our urban environments can be made more beautiful and inspiring with small and big efforts by each of us everyday.

Highlights from over 300 stories:

1 People of Rochor – In a “Humans of Rochor Centre” story, we got to know people like Mr Ong, one of the first batch of residents to live in Rochor Centre with cherished memories of the neighbourhood. “I moved here in 1977, and have been living here since.”

2 Cycling 50 km daily – For those considering a more active lifestyle, be inspired by Daniel Sin, who cycles 50 km every day from east to west and back. “I was getting older and losing stamina. So I decided to integrate cycling into my daily routine.”



3 Merci, Didier – We celebrated heroes behind many of our conserved buildings. French architect Didier Repellin is one of them. His love for conservation brought him to Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s and he is behind the restoration of buildings like CHIJMES and Empress Place.

4 Chinatown gems – Lena Koh, a URA conservation volunteer, is excited about uncovering stories behind our buildings. We joined her on a walk around Chinatown and go to where Wong Fei Hong disciples train and Tiger Balm was made.

5 Being architects – Leading local firm WOHA's co-founder Wong Mun Summ and Associate Phua Hong Wei recognised under URA's '20 under 45' series shared personal insights on what it means to be architects. Mun Summ says: “I used to live in Tanglin Halt and once after coming back from a movie, I ran quickly... flew and my face landed on the tarmac...I became an architect because I wanted to make sure things are softer!”



6 Best-kept secret – We explored the largest and best-kept Japanese cemetery outside of Japan along Yio Chu Kang road. Behind the well maintained cemetery is Kim Keok Kee, whom we chanced upon. He has been the sole caretaker for more than 50 years and grew up on the cemetery grounds.



7 Island life – We escaped city life for islands like Kusu, named after a tortoise (as kusu means in Hokkien). The most popular legend behind the name is that 2 shipwrecked fishermen were saved by a tortoise who transformed into the tiny island. Before land reclamation, the island's outline did look pretty tortoise-esque.

8 Seen from above – “The geometry and shapes of our environment from the air is breath taking,” says photographer Yeo Kai Wen. Besides this drone shot of MacRitchie Reservoir, Kai Wen's images reflect the careful planning of greenery and built structures in Singapore.

9 Geylang in the light – A resting Buddha statue stands in contrast to a mural of modern-day Singapore. Photographer Philipp Aldrup captured another side of Geylang.



10 Behind the National Gallery – We took a peek into the National Gallery to discover how old and new were blended together linking the historic City Hall and Supreme Court into one art museum. Even jail cells of the old supreme court have been retained. Plumbing system and the cistern of the toilet were located outside to prevent those awaiting trial from harming themselves.

11 Potong Pasir – We joined the 6th edition of the popular art walkabout OH! Open House to Potong Pasir and were charmed by its people and landscapes. We entered Uncle Lee's home, who has lived here since 1984. He won the first prize in 4D betting on different combinations of numbers related to the former MP Chiam See Tong.

Stories in this supplement were published in the Going Places Singapore website, an urban e-magazine started in 2012 as an experiment to delve deeper into our love and fascination for the urban scape around us. After 5 years, it is now closed. We hope this selection of stories from the e-magazine will inspire you to continue to actively shape this island of ours.

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