

## TALL STOREYS

A view of Singapore from the Marina Bay Golf Course, with, from left: the Gardens by the Bay (01); see this issue of Wallpaper\*, page 186; the Moshe Safdie-designed Marina Bay Sands resort, which includes three towers topped by a SkyPark (02); the new Financial Center area (03); the lotus-shaped ArtScience Museum (04), also designed by Safdie; the Singapore Flyer (05), the world's largest observation wheel; and the United Overseas Bank Plaza One (06), the city's tallest tower

# HIGH AND RISING

It's not just Singapore's skyline that's on the up as daring architects, innovative chefs and bold designers reach for new creative heights

PHOTOGRAPHY: DARREN SOH WRITER: DAVEN WU

The received wisdom about why Singapore was so slow in developing a creative/design/artistic scene is that for the first three decades after gaining independence from Britain in 1965, everyone was too busy trying to build a nation. The economy, infrastructure, health care, basic housing and the creation of racial and social harmony all claimed priority over any utopian ideal where one could leisurely debate the merits of Niemeyer or Le Corbusier. The very idea of architectural conservation was met with silence. Indeed, until a decade or so ago, introspection was a luxury the country could ill afford. At stake has been nothing less than the survival of Singapore's statehood. As the joke goes, Singapore is a very good address in a very bad neighbourhood.

All of which makes Singapore's current renaissance such an extraordinary feat. From a standing start, this tiny island of barely 700 sq km has fast-forwarded a generation's worth of effort to create a buzzing hive of creativity. Today, the Singapore Biennale is a key fixture on the arts calendar, while orchestral pieces are played out by both local and visiting companies in full symphonic glory in the Esplanade theatres and the Victoria Concert Hall.

Around the block, the Palladian-style Supreme Court building is being made over by French practice Studio Milou into a new national art gallery. In the warrens of the Old School, a recently converted mixed-use complex on Mount Sophia, fashion designers consult with niche magazine editors while film-makers discuss projects with set designers. And at the new School of the Arts, the next generation of creatives is being groomed.

Not bad for a country where parents – all dyed-in-the-wool loyalists of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* – still insist their children take up a career in law, medicine, engineering or banking.

To be sure, much of this growth has been driven by public sector bodies – such as the National Arts Council, the DesignSingapore Council and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts – all of which have worked hard to shift Singapore from a manufacturing-based economy to one that is knowledge-based.

Tham Khai Meng, the worldwide creative director of advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather (and a Singaporean himself) says that Singapore is 'doing an exemplary job organising and centralising the various creative groups from advertising, industrial, architectural and visual design, rewarding their stars, showcasing their work and promoting their talent'.

That said, everyone understands that it is not enough for the government to want certain things to happen. Private sector players need to take the initiative, and make what one insider describes as 'greater efforts to understand what the stakeholders of the creative industries themselves see in their individual or collective futures, to find ways to support their endeavours without trying to control market forces'.

In particular, playwright Michael Chiang believes Singapore's arts scene has developed >>

**GREEN SHOOTS**

Designed by award-winning local practice WoHa, Singapore's School of the Arts is training the city's next generation of bright young creatives

**COOL SCHOOL**

Housed in a former Methodist girls' school, the Old School on Mount Sophia is a new mixed-use complex incorporating a cinema, artists' studios, galleries and café spaces

**STATE OF THE ART**

Singapore's old Supreme Court building (replaced by a Foster + Partners design in 2005, just visible in the background) and City Hall are being transformed into the city's first national art gallery by French practice Studio Milou. The project, which will link the two historic buildings with a giant glass canopy, is due to be completed in 2013



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somewhat randomly. 'From the overtly serious to the painfully naïve, all the extremes have been wrung out to dry over the last two decades,' he says. 'Thankfully, a lot that is good and promising has resulted from the experience. Theatre groups have always done their part in talent-scouting and nurturing new stars. TheatreWorks, for instance, began their Writers' Lab and 24-Hour Playwriting Competition over 20 years ago. Corporate companies, in particular, are encouraged to sponsor the arts by supplementing public grants and initiatives.'

Equally, the large body of expatriates and returning diaspora – home after stints abroad studying and working – have imposed their own cultural accents and aspirations.

Australian interior designer Matt Shang arrived in Singapore in 1997 as a fresh graduate. In the intervening years, he says, the design scene and community has increased ten-fold. 'It really feels like there is a younger, more innovative

generation who are willing to take more risks. I think of graphic designers such as Felix Ng of Silnt, who set up a design film festival, Larry Peh of &Larry, and Justin Long of Hjhgher, all of whom are investing greatly in Singapore's design culture, as are architects such as Lekker Design and Takenouchi Webb.'

Raised and educated in America, media consultant Aun Koh returned to Singapore in 1998, just in time to witness what he calls the country's dynamic culinary evolution. 'Singapore's dining scene today is bursting with new ideas,' he says. 'This is being fuelled by our own, increasingly well-travelled, chefs, as well as all the ever-rising number of foreign chefs who have decided to call Singapore home.'

'We're witnessing a renaissance that is leading towards a unique modern Singaporean cuisine, in the same way that there is now a modern Japanese culinary movement that has changed not just Japan's culinary scene but the

world's. I think we're right at the beginning of this kind of explosion here.'

On the architectural front, the built environment continues to grow in intriguing spurts. A quick glance at the Raffles Place waterfront reveals a new downtown area in the works, flanking new skyscrapers, a DNA spiral-shaped bridge, and the dominating triptych that is the Moshe Safdie-designed Marina Bay Sands resort, located right next to the ambitious Eden-esque Gardens by the Bay.

Elsewhere on the island, the battle to preserve a balance between past and future is waged on many fronts. What is especially telling about the kinder, gentler government is its willingness to acknowledge that its efforts to modernise have sometimes had unintended consequences. Former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has said that in the country's rush to rebuild, 'we knocked down many old and quaint buildings. Then we realised we were destroying a valuable part of

our cultural heritage. We were demolishing what tourists found attractive and unique in Singapore. We halted the demolition and instead undertook extensive conservation and restoration of ethnic districts such as Chinatown and Little India. We were a little late, but fortunately we have retained enough of our history to remind ourselves and tourists of our past.'

The subtext, of course, is commercial interests. Old shop-houses – once decrepit shops on the ground floor and gloomy, rambling residences on the upper floors – are being snapped up by a new wave of connoisseur architects and savvy retailers, and zhooshed up into hotels, luxury residences, boutiques and offices.

The cause has been helped by the fact that many Singaporean architects themselves have become poster boys for Singapore's new look. This generation's jet-setting architectural stars – Chan Soo Khian and Aga Khan Award-winners Wong Mun Summ and Richard Hassell, for

**'Creative people will go where creative people are. Singapore has that pioneering spirit'**

instance – appear in glossy magazine spreads with the same regularity as their beautifully designed train stations and apartment complexes.

This creative gold rush has – with more than a little nudge from the Economic Development Board, Contact Singapore and the Singapore Design Council – lured heavyweight foreign talent and corporations (such as LucasFilm, NICE, FZD, Eight Inc) from around the world. As Tham Khai Meng points out: 'Creative people will go where creative people are.'

The speed at which this creative push has occurred is startling. Tham's admiration is unbounded. 'I don't think an initiative of this scale and scope has been undertaken anywhere else in the world, certainly not in London or New York. Singapore has that pioneering spirit.'

Just how far Singapore will push the boundaries remains to be seen, but if the images and reports in the following pages are anything to go by, the sky's the limit. ✱