"I don't believe in nostalgia, nostalgia has no future."
- Tang Guan Bee, Principal Architect/Tangguanbee Architects

"Inspiration will come in many different forms, so I don't actually seek for inspiration."
- Sonny Chan, Principal Architect/Chan Sau Yan Associates

"50 years ago, all architects could draw. By my time, half could draw. Now, none can draw."
- Tay Kheng Soon, Principal Architect/Akitek Tenggara

"There are many good architects but there are only very few great architects."
- Lim Cheng Kooi, Principal Architect/AR43
ISSUE #267

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Cover
Cover Design: Kelley Cheng

Publisher
Singapore Architect, publication number
ISSN 0218-7728 is published bi-monthly by
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MICA (P) 199/12/2011

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Editor’s Note

Architects are great storytellers. Good stories can convince clients to spend millions of dollars on architecture. Millions. That is how good their stories have to be. Hence, it comes as no surprise that architects make interesting interview subjects too, because of the stories they can tell.

I first met Tang Guan Bee when I was still an architecture school student in the early 90s. Mr. Tang, as he is fondly addressed by all of us, used to organise ad-hoc talks and drinking sessions at his “Black Shophouse” in Chinatown, where literally all were welcome. We remember fondly the unpretentious and unkempt interior, which we observed was also a favourite hangout for rats and talents alike. Yes, real rats, of the scary sort, and real talents, of the delightful sort, such as Ling Hao, Chang Yong Ter, and Randy Chan, are all “disciples” of the TG8 “sect.” On the long vertical wall of the air-well in the shop house, Mr. Tang’s Chinese calligraphic words read “还我江山,” which literally translates to “return me my empire.”

In my first interview with Mr. Tang, roughly two decades back when I was a young writer at a local architectural magazine, one of Mr. Tang’s favourite urgings was ”Pak ang moh piah!”, which translates from Hokkien as, “Beat the foreign soldiers!”

Don’t take this in the wrong light—it is actually a very good metaphor that expressed his wish to see more local architects be given the chance to do big projects in Singapore some day. One would be tempted to read “还我江山” in relation to Mr. Tang’s hopes of seeing an architectural scene here dominated by our own Singaporean architects. But when asked in the interview if that was what he meant by “还我江山,” I realised it was nothing more than an exercise in aesthetics by the English-educated Tang, who revealed that he is not well-versed in the Chinese language and those words were chosen simply based on the “forms” of their characters. An avid self-taught calligrapher, Mr. Tang said that he likes Chinese calligraphy because it is all about the right place and right time, as one has to meditate before committing the first drop of ink, which should continue in one breath to the last stroke. And that perhaps gives one an insight into the seemingly spontaneous and sculptural forms of Tang’s architecture.

Today, most of us still remember fondly the rebellious black façade of Mr. Tang’s shop house wilfully standing out amidst its pastel-shaded neighbours, which seems apt for an ever-rebellious architect clearly driven by passion and not money.

When asked in the recent interview (in this issue), “Mr. Tang, have you ever turned down a client?”

The answer was an equally wilful, “So many times!”

While Mr. Tang exudes a hippie, fatherly kind of vibe, Sonny Chan feels like that suave uncle you always wished you had. He was stylishly dressed and extremely articulate yet warm at the same time when I first interviewed him in the early 90s. At the end of the interview, he took the 20-year-old me to a very delicious lunch and obviously, the very young me was both delighted and charmed. It is very nice that we remain good friends today because of an interview we had almost 20 years ago.

There are so many ways to write about architecture, but it is always the stories that make them different.

In this issue, we hope to capture all these wonderful stories through a series of interviews. Besides featuring the two newly crowned and well-deserved “Designers of the Year”—the highest accolade of design in Singapore—Tang Guan Bee and Sonny Chan, we managed to get hold of some familiar names in our industry—Rene Tan, Lim Cheng Kooi, Yip Yuen Hong, Chang Yong Ter, and Tay Khang Soon—to talk about their works and journey.

Enjoy the stories.

Your friendly Editor,

Kelley Cheng
Editor-in-Chief
21st February 2012
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