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PUBLISHED BY
URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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Singapore, the world’s urban laboratory

New York City’s urban design chief gives a “reading” of our city and shares his Athenian experience of change in Singapore.

As the urban design director for the Department of City Planning in New York, Alexandros Washburn knows a thing or two about what makes an urban space tick – including our Little Red Dot. We pick his brains on how a city’s past affects its present, and why Singapore can be a “creative laboratory” for the world.
“An empire falls and the width of a street changes. You can read so much about the city by looking at its physical traces.”
You have been to Singapore more than once – what were your first impressions?

You know, when you come in from the airport through the landscaping of the connector road, when you see the buildings that have a terracing of green; you start seeing this integration of nature in an otherwise technological city. I think what it says right off the bat is that there are many layers going on here.

Was there a sense that the physical landscape mirrors what many think of as Singaporean characteristics, like organisation or an adherence to rules?

I know Singapore has this reputation for rules and the like, but I don’t see that as its primary characteristic. It’s more of a layering of different objectives like the cultural, economic, social and interpersonal, which are being integrated into a very compact space.

So what is it like to see the world through an urban designer’s eyes? Does your work change the way you look at the world?

Oh, completely! You read the city constantly. There’s so much that you can understand from the marks on the stones and streets… You know, you are always looking for clues. And I think if you’re attentive, you can see things that reveal an enormous amount about the present and the past of a city.

Something that interests me particularly is how the past affects the present.

How so?

Well, you go to an ancient city like Athens, for example. It’s very instructive to take a walk in a straight line. It’s just something I love to do in different cities, where you start at one point and try to go as far as you can in a straight line. So for instance you start at the Acropolis, and you walk on Aeolus Street, through the ancient Roman forum, into the 19th century corner, into the modern corner of the city…. And you can tell things that went on during that time.

The orderliness during the Roman period is reflected in the width of the streets and paving. And then there’s a certain haphazardness that appears when there was no central government. Then, in the 19th century when the Europeans installed a monarchy there was a new kind of block form that was put in, which was orderly and serene. And of course that was modified in the 60s when a new way of building happened, and those ratios were distorted. That reflected a different society at that point.

So there are these macro-hints that you can see. You know, an empire falls and the width of a street changes. Because cities grow over such a long time, you can read so much about the city by looking at its physical traces, the way you can almost tell how old a tree is by counting the rings in its trunk. There’s a basic tenet that over time, cities don’t lie. They accurately reflect who we are as opposed to who we imagine ourselves to be.

So walking in a straight line almost becomes like a physical timeline, a walk through history? Did you ‘walk that walk’ when you first visited Singapore?

Yeah. They suggested a hotel near the URA, which is close to Chinatown. So you’re walking through the storefront of a three-storey rowhouse – you call them shophouses, is that the correct term?

And then you come up through a couple of winding streets and reach the Pinnacle@Duxton. We took an elevator hundreds of feet in the air, and there was this jogging track…! Okay, there’s your Athenian experience of change, but accelerated to a timeframe of hundreds rather than thousands of years. And given a third dimension: a vertical dimension.

So I think the Singaporean relationship of that layering is fascinating. The relationship of this jogging track in the Pinnacle to the shop fronts and winding streets of the place labeled Chinatown and the older neighbourhoods… It’s really indicative of where a city has wanted to go. And a hundred years from now, people will judge that much more clearly. I’ll show not just the aspirations, but the result.

Let us stick with that area of town: say you have a shophouse built in 1910, near the Pinnacle@Duxton, completed in 2009. Will there be another quantum leap in a century? Will there be something next to the Pinnacle@Duxton that makes it look miniscule?

Well, there will certainly be something next to it… but I don’t know in what way it will make it feel old. Is the future simply bigger and taller? I don’t think so. I think Singapore is actually blazing an experimental trail of integrating natural elements into the buildings, like the LUSH (Landscape for Urban Spaces and High Rises) programme. So my hope is that Singapore is kind of a laboratory where buildings and nature intertwine more and more.

Maybe 80 years from now when the next Pinnacle is built, it won’t even look like a building. Maybe it’ll look entirely like a landform, and be as natural as a rainforest.
Singapore can experiment, but it can’t afford to make mistakes.
You mention a great ancient design rule in your book: “No street shall be narrower than the width of a laden donkey,” which conjures up some great images! Are there any similar rules that cities should be reminding themselves of?

Well, for me, the one unchanging rule relates to a pedestrian, a citizen. We take “rule” to mean “law”, but it also means a measure or reference, like a measuring ruler. Man as a measuring device stays permanent, in my book. Cities lost their way, in a sense, when they gave up on a human being as the touchstone for all dimensional decisions. Just like the ancient city had the rule of the laden donkey, I think the width of the walking citizen, or when it comes to kids, the width of a double stroller, is important.

You say you view Singapore almost as a “lab” for future urban design around the world. Do you think because of its small size and its need to be creative, that it can be a role model for other countries?

Yes, I think absolutely Singapore is a laboratory. It’s got a great combination of creativity, resources and unified action, which makes urban design scale experiments possible in a measurable timeframe. The corollary of this is that Singapore can’t make mistakes, right? It can experiment, but it can’t afford to make mistakes, because it has so little land. That makes the stakes very high.

It reminds me of when [famed US politician] Henry Kissinger was asked, after he had left the State Department, how he liked life as a well-paid consultant. And he said, “I hate it. The stakes are too low.” [Laughs] So really, Singapore has the need to get something right, get it done quickly, but also inspire. That’s why I like the Marina Barrage project. It does so many things right.

In your book, The Nature of Urban Design, you mentioned how the Marina Barrage is ‘managing’ nature rather than just ‘protecting’ it. Is your argument that when cities protect nature, we distance ourselves from it? We frame it up on a wall, rather than give it a hug?

Yes. I think the human attitude to nature has swung substantially. Originally when we came to live in cities, we feared nature. We wanted a place that was safe from predators around us. And in the 19th century, when industrial production got so high, we realised that our by-products threaten nature too.

We turned to the situation where we are so damaging to nature, we felt we had to protect nature from ourselves. That’s the current paradigm through which nature is being viewed.

I think that paradigm is changing, and I think Singapore is at the forefront of that change.

By Daniel Seifert

This article was first published in Going Places Singapore, an online magazine about appreciating our city anew. Visit www.goingplacesingapore.sg for more stories.
Woodlands Regional Centre: Revitalising the northern neighbourhood

Residents seek greenery, recreation and community spaces in the soon-to-be-developed Woodlands Regional Centre.

A dialogue session was held in July to seek feedback on the proposed plans for Woodlands Regional Centre. Different stakeholders including grassroot representatives, key institutional users around the area, property developers, representatives from professional bodies and consulting firms, gathered at the URA Centre on 13 July 2013 to share their hopes for the regional centre.

Greenery stood out as one of the key themes during the session. Many participants said that Woodlands (read: “Wood-Lands”) has always been well-known for its lush greenery. Therefore, the regional centre should reflect this characteristic. Some also highlighted that developments must take into account sustainability and local heritage.

Other participants raised the importance of carving out community spaces within the regional centre to provide recreational and other community activities, which will help preserve the “kampong spirit” in Woodlands. This is aligned with URAs plans to weave public spaces through the regional centre. For instance, residents can look forward to a vibrant street experience along the pedestrian mall which will connect the current Woodlands MRT station to Republic Polytechnic.

Many focus group participants felt that the session helped facilitate exchange of ideas between different stakeholders.

“I found the session very insightful as we got to share our opinions, knowledge and experiences. Many of the planners and designers do not live in public housing estates, so it was useful to hear from others,” said Ms Maria Boey, Town Planner and President of the Institute of Parks and Recreation, Singapore.

On the drawing board for Woodlands Regional Centre

A well-connected pedestrian mall, more waterfront recreation and an extensive network of cycling paths – these are but some of the features residents in Woodlands can look forward to in the upcoming Woodlands Regional Centre.

The regional centre will house two distinct precincts. The Woodlands North Coast precinct, sited between Republic Polytechnic and the waterfront with about 70 ha of soft land for development, will be transformed into an idyllic waterfront environment with a mix of residential, commercial and lifestyle uses. The 30 ha Woodlands Central district will be hallmarked by a pedestrian mall, which is envisaged as a key focal point and activity corridor, where residents can enjoy an intimately-scaled and unique street-oriented experience.

To be developed over the next 10 to 15 years, this will be Singapore’s third regional centre after the first two in Tampines and Jurong. Regional centres are a key feature of URA’s decentralisation strategy, which bring jobs and amenities closer to homes and provide more location options for businesses.

By Kelly Ng
The art and architecture of Tiong Bahru

The architecture and artistic residents of Tiong Bahru are both symbols of Singapore’s cultural past and directions to the neighbourhood’s future.
“I don’t see it,” I said after studying the Dancing Girl sculpture for the better part of a minute.

No matter how intently I stared, I just could not decipher the artistic puzzle before my eyes. All I see is a concrete swan on a pedestal, but where was the girl?

Dr Kevin Tan, former President of the Singapore Heritage Society and my tour guide for the day, pointed eagerly at the tip of the sculpture. “See, there? That’s her arm, and she’s holding a fan. That at the bottom, you see? That’s the pleated skirt, and she’s doing a harvest dance.”

Oh, I thought to myself, as my eyes squinted under the blazing sun. There she is.

The girl

The Dancing Girl is the work of the late Lim Nang Sang, the same man behind the Merlion sculpture. When Seng Poh Garden was conceived in 1972, Ch’ng Jit Koon, then a Member of Parliament for Tiong Bahru and a former resident of the neighbourhood, wanted the garden to be given greater prominence. Mr Lim sculpted the 1.2 metre-high sculpture, which in turn became Tiong Bahru’s very first piece of public art.

Till today, the sculpture remains the estate’s only piece of public sculpture. How then did Tiong Bahru lend itself to the name “Hollywood of Singapore”?

Art in Tiong Bahru, Dr Tan said, goes beyond just a concrete statue. The estate’s architecture and residents are its most visible and impressive public art works yet, he asserted.

The architecture

If you were to take a stroll down the streets of Tiong Bahru today, the first thing that strikes you will be the houses – these days, they do not build houses like that anymore.

The estate was one of the first public housing projects in Singapore. Constructed by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in the 1930s, the buildings were heavily inspired by “Streamline Moderne”, a minimalistic architectural style hallmarked by simple, functional lines.

“The architecture that proliferates in magazines today is called ‘Dramatic Architecture,’” explained Mr Choo Meng Foo, an independent consultant with 20 years of experience in architectural and urban planning works in Asia. “These ‘Dramatic Architectures’ tend towards decadence and weakness as it arouses the senses to the most extreme. Many architectural designs these days are like that, but not Tiong Bahru.”

The pre-war buildings in Tiong Bahru were greatly inspired by the industrial age of the 1920s. “Back then, if you were able to drive a car, take a plane or a cruise, you were on the cutting edge,” explained Dr Tan. “As such, buildings here were designed to look like automobiles, trains, ocean liners and airplanes.”

On a closer look, you will notice the nautical elements built into the residential houses, such as the rounded windows, which resemble portholes; and the clean, curved corners that resemble the bridge of a ship. In fact, blocks 81 and 82 are known to the locals as the “aeroplane blocks,” because the elongated layout of the buildings resembles the wings of an airplane.
However, the houses in Tiong Bahru are not all form and no function. For one, their adaptation of the five-foot ways in shophouses allows people to move between buildings with ease and creates public spaces to meet neighbours and build relationships. Ventilation air wells were also built into the structure of the buildings to improve air circulation and temperature regulation. The unique green-coloured glass windows also help to reduce glares from the tropical sun. In fact, Tiong Bahru was also the first neighbourhood in Singapore to have proper sanitation.

The combination of form and function, according to Dr Tan, is an art in itself. “You need two things for good architecture,” he explained. “One, you need the absence of overly restraining rules. Two, you need architects and developers who are willing to work against tried and tested formulae.” These factors, according to Dr Tan, are the reasons why Tiong Bahru continues to be one of the most beautiful estates in the city-state.

The artists

While there is no denying that the “Streamline Moderne” architecture gave Tiong Bahru a veil of glamour, it was the people living behind that veil who really imbued the estate with artistic and cultural significance. Mr Choo explained it best when he said: “No place stays the same forever. Each one adapts and changes according to the times and its users.”

Throughout its history, Tiong Bahru has attracted many well-known literary and artistic personalities, giving the neighbourhood an air of sophistication and creative freedom.

Perhaps one of the estate’s most famous residents was Mr Heng Kim Ching, better known by his stage name, Wang Sar. Mr Heng was one half of the highly successful comedic duo Wang Sar and Ye Fong (sometimes known as Ah Pui and Ah San), who were based on characters from Old Master Q comic books. Their standup comedy routines featured a hilarious mix of banters in Teo Chew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and English, and were immensely popular at that time.

The Quests, a popular homegrown band in the 1960s, comprised four teenagers who had been neighbours in Tiong Bahru. Aside from covering popular American and British hit-makers, the band also wrote, performed and recorded many original songs in their heyday. Today, the band’s legacy continues, and many local musicians consider it to be Singapore’s answer to The Beatles.

In recent years, Tiong Bahru has experienced an artistic renaissance. Just last year, OH! Open House had held its annual art walkabout in Tiong Bahru – over two weekends, 15 artists had transformed six homes in the estate into their artistic spaces. Meanwhile, establishments such as White Canvas Gallery and The Orange Thimble (a café that frequently holds art exhibitions) attract a younger, more artistic crowd.

Undoubtedly, Tiong Bahru has changed dramatically over the years. Gone are the textile vendors on the streets and the old wanton noodle store around the corner. However, the recent influx of designers, artists and writers has brought a new lease of life into the neighbourhood. Mr Choo believes that this phenomenon will continue to persist as long as the estate exists. “I foresee [Tiong Bahru] growing into a place for artists, both local and international, to congregate and exchange ideas. Perhaps, in the future, it can become a place that supports artists and their works. There should be a new form of art spaces inserted into Tiong Bahru, which can in turn encourage creativity and sustainability.”

The reminder

Even with the migration of these new establishments into Tiong Bahru, the estate’s architecture and artistic history will continue to serve as reminders of the neighbourhood’s vibrant past; a time when art was created, nurtured and set free. Heritage trails organised by the National Heritage Board and other non-profit groups, continue to bring younger members of the society through the streets of Tiong Bahru, reminding them of the life that was.

Dr Tan aptly compared Tiong Bahru to a pair of sports trainers: “If you don’t wear them, the shoes will fall apart after some time. Buildings are funny that way, too. If people don’t live in them, they will collapse.”

By Chin Wei Lien

This article was first published in Going Places Singapore, an online magazine about appreciating our city anew. Visit www.goingplacessingapore.sg for more stories.
Lighting up – with heart

Asia's first and only sustainable light festival returns in March next year with light installations that will evoke heartfelt thoughts while driving home the message of sustainability.

Come March 2014, Marina Bay will be illuminated once again by i Light Marina Bay (iLMB 2014) – Asia’s first and only sustainable light art festival. This third iteration of the biennial festival organised by URA promises an exhibition of delightful and heart-felt light installations in line with the theme Light+HeART. Skyline had a chat with the curatorial team from ONG&ONG Pte Ltd on how they envision it coming together.

Why the theme Light+HeART? How did the idea come about?

When we talk about sustainability, it’s often associated with technology and engineering. In an urban setting like Singapore, lighting is often associated with energy consumption but it shouldn’t be – lighting can be used efficiently. More importantly, lighting can be used to energise people and inspire them. Lighting can play an active, vibrant role rather than a secondary role in providing illumination only.

How do you intend to bring the theme across?

When choosing the art pieces, the criteria we have in mind is that they must be interactive and “light-hearted”. At the same time, they must support the message of sustainability in some way. For example, the artists chosen could harness the forces of nature in their artwork or may even engage the public in a drive to donate unwanted items so that these can be recycled into works of art.

What do you think is so meaningful about the event’s artistic direction?

Many of us look at the Arts as a form of passive enjoyment – a passive or static piece that is the result of the artist’s creation of his or her work and to be admired only in a cursory or
superficially aesthetic manner. However, with new forms of art such as visual art installations becoming more popular, art is now taking on the concept of “Art as a Verb,” meaning art can now take on an additional dimension – transformative power.

At iLMB 2014, we want art to draw our attention to the existing practices of unsustainability and to engage us in the journey towards becoming more sustainable. We want art to be an agent of ethical change and to challenge the public in using their “hearts”. If each of us is nudged along to help remediate the damaged environment through our own small contributions, then we can consider ourselves as having successfully achieved our ultimate goal for iLMB 2014 – to help the public re-envision a more harmonious co-existence between man and the environment.

**What is the one thing that any participant of iLMB 2014 should take away?**

The greatest takeaway we want the public to have is that Light+HeART is a unique concept of raising public consciousness of how our actions impact the environment, and to inspire people to effect change in their thinking, attitudes and actions on the environment.

**What expectations do you have of artwork submissions?**

We have reached out to art schools, the embassies based here and our own media contacts to spread the word about the Open Call for proposals. We have received good support from them so we expect to receive thought-provoking pieces through their “Art as a Verb” installations.

**How do you feel about taking on this project for the first time?**

Although it’s our first time curating iLMB, it has been a truly fulfilling experience because we have the opportunity to harness and mobilise collaborative resources – with our team members, URA, the patrons, developers, co-creators, artists, students and the community – to shape the event into a more socially conscious one.

Through iLMB, we hope to inspire a way of thinking which changes the consumerist attitudes of today’s society that have led to many of our existing environmental problems.

It’s about taking the opportunity to be a catalyst for a new alternative lifestyle, one that is more environmentally conscious and more informed that one’s actions can have a symbiotic reaction on the environment.

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**By Cassandra Yeap**
Updating ORA guidelines for Singapore River

In shaping the Singapore River, URA walks a tightrope between injecting vibrancy and safeguarding public interests.
Walking along certain stretches of the Singapore River can be a challenge as one often has to navigate through rows of tables and chairs lined along the river’s edge. On weekend nights, there will barely be any space for pedestrians to walk to and fro along the riverfront.

To help ensure more harmonious co-sharing of public spaces along the riverfront, URA recently conducted a review of the Outdoor Refreshment Area (ORA) guidelines for Robertson Quay and Clarke Quay.

Stakeholders consulted during the latest review had expressed their wishes for wider pedestrian walkways, easier access to the river’s edge and to strengthen the differentiated identity and character of the different quays.

“Commercial establishments need to stay within their designated ORAs and not impinge on space that is meant to be for the enjoyment of the general public,” said Mr Dewan, a resident at Robertson Blue, a condominium at Robertson Quay.

Taking into consideration similar feedback raised by other stakeholders, the updated guidelines for the two quays (excluding Clarke Quay Conservation Area) still allow for ORAs on the promenade, right next to the F&B outlets but not at the river’s edge. This frees up the riverfront for public access such that people can enjoy riverfront dining while still providing spacious walkways for pedestrians and joggers. This is similar to the alfresco dining experiences at Quayside Isle in Sentosa and One Fullerton at Marina Bay.

However, there is no change to the current riverside ORAs along stretches with conserved buildings, such as the Clarke Quay Conservation Area and Boat Quay. In these areas, the promenade directly adjacent to the shophouses is required to be maintained as a fire engine access way.

Mr Condon, a fellow resident at Robertson Blue, said that the updated guidelines help clarify the distinction between the quays. “As the three different riverside quays have quite different characters, I think it is appropriate to have different configurations for F&B along the river. The guidelines strike an appropriate balance between the mixed commercial and residential character of Robertson Quay,” he said.

URA recognises that ORAs do create a riverside buzz that injects vibrancy into a precinct. However, riverfront spaces should also cater to various needs apart from outdoor dining, such as providing a walkway for pedestrians – this is the crux of the current revision to the ORA guidelines.

Your next walk along the Singapore River promises to be a more leisurely one – where you can take in the sights and sounds of the riverfront without having to squeeze through clutters of tables and chairs or paying to dine at an ORA.

By Galen Lim
Winning design set to rejuvenate Geylang Serai

The new civic centre integrates arts, culture, sports and lifestyle activities in a contemporary setting, while affirming the area’s distinct heritage.
Geylang Serai’s new civic centre will feature contemporary elements, such as a pedestrian mall, while maintaining traditional elements like double-pitched roofs. Inspired by traditional Malay delicacies and architecture, the winning design by Design-Environment Group Architects beat 55 other entries in a design competition held earlier this year. Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS), to be sited at the former Malay Village, will play a prime role in the redevelopment of an area known fondly for its culture and community spirit.

Dr Maliki Osman, Minister of State for the Ministry of National Development and Mayor (South East District) revealed the winning design on 13 July 2013. It was selected by a panel comprising Dr Maliki, Geylang Serai Advisor, Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef, Pak Yatiman Yusof and representatives from the Singapore Institute of Architects, People’s Association and URA.

The design’s double-pitched roofs are similar to those of traditional Malay houses and are inspired by the “serai” plant (lemongrass), “ketupat” and “serambi” (verandah) on stilts in its use of space. Picking up on the roofline of the Geylang Serai Market next door, it is meant to be a seamless addition to the character of Geylang Road.

Multi-functional spaces and facilities are inter-woven into a unique whole. For instance, the pedestrian mall along Geylang Road will be seamlessly weaved into the ground level of the civic centre. This allows the centre’s activities to “spill out” onto the streets, which will add to the precinct’s vibrancy. Works were done by URA last year to develop the pedestrian mall into a three metre-wide walkway with multi-functional smart poles with power outlets, to support such festivities.

Members of the community and various stakeholders were consulted to form the brief for the centre. URA and the National University of Singapore had also collaborated on a workshop for Year Three NUS architecture students to develop a community hall concept for the centre. The students took into consideration place-making, heritage and identity to explore different concepts for a hall that is meant to become a landmark and a community meeting place. The students’ works were displayed as part of a roving exhibition on WGS held at the URA Centre from 19 August to 31 August.

The final five designs of the competition will also be showcased at the Geylang Serai Community Club from 3 September to 5 November and at Kampong Ubi Community Centre from 8 November to 9 November.

By Cassandra Yeap
Designing Singapore's living room

Three students, three public spaces and one vision: to change the way people engage and interact with public spaces in Singapore.

Public spaces can mean different things to different people.

To an office worker, a public space is where he can loosen his tie and take a breather. To a retiree, a public space is wherever he can hang out with his friends. Public spaces are a city’s living room, a place where people congregate and interact with one another.

If designed well, even functional public spaces like parks and void decks can transform into places of interest for the entire community. It may sound like a tall order to balance both form and function within a public space, but such a challenge is exactly what three Singapore Polytechnic (SP) students took upon themselves for their Final-Year Project (FYP).

Design your own experience

Along with some 120 students, Priscilla Tan, Zhou Yang and Teo Ying Xuan – graduates of the Experience and Product Design (DXPD) course at Singapore Polytechnic Design School – participated in the design school’s graduation show held at the URA Centre in March this year. Titled “Edition 13.7,” the exhibition showcased how these students reinvented public spaces through product and experience design.

According to Mr Winston Chai, course manager of DXPD, the aim of the course is to provide students with opportunities to pursue a variety of design specialisations, such as product and furniture design, packaging design, service design, and advertising. “For the past four years, students of DXPD have been collaborating with multinational companies such as Procter & Gamble and Hewlett-Packard, as well as government agencies like the URA, to explore and develop potentials of experience enhancement through product and experience design,” Mr Chai said.

Skyline takes a look at how a dash of ingenuity can transform the public spaces in our neighbourhoods.
Pioneering an identity

One who has lived in Singapore for a considerable period of time can easily distinguish between two neighbourhoods – say for instance, Choa Chu Kang and Tampines. However, such distinctions may not be as intuitive to foreigners.

Having lived in Pioneer for most of her life, Priscilla Tan understands how her neighbourhood may seem similar to other heartland neighbourhoods. But the difference lies in the identity of the Pioneer neighbourhood, she said. “Many neighbourhoods in Singapore tend to look the same, what with white and empty void decks. That’s why I want to give Pioneer its own identity.”

After four weeks of observing and documenting the movements of residents in her neighbourhood, Priscilla charted the main walking routes and identified the public space most frequented by the Pioneer residents – the neighbourhood market. There, she found huge, multi-coloured umbrellas which became the inspiration for her project titled “Identity in Pioneer”.

She began by designing a series of multi-coloured lamp shades that looked like miniature versions of the umbrellas found in the market. Measuring 90 cm by 90 cm, these lamp shades were designed to fit existing street lamps so that when night comes, the lights would cast opalescent shadows on the ground, which guide visitors to the market. As visitors follow these lights, they will come across rows of umbrellas, each over a metre high, that provide shade at the designated routes.

“During my research, I noticed that a lot of aunties would take a break under trees on their way to the market,” Priscilla explained. “These umbrellas will give them a chance to stop, chit-chat and take in their surroundings.”

More than just a colourful set of signposts, these umbrellas give the westerly neighbourhood of Pioneer its unique character.

“When I walk into Tiong Bahru, for example, I know exactly where I am because the architecture is so different and special,” Priscilla said. “I want people to feel that way about Pioneer too.”
Bench on fire

In Singapore, there is a place for everything, whether to shop, eat or spend time with a significant other. However, Zhou Yang feels there is a lack of public spaces dedicated to youths in general. “Youths are often overlooked by the mainstream when it comes to dedicated public spaces,” Zhou Yang said. “Along Orchard Road, for example, you see a lot of shopping malls and high-end shops meant for people with high spending power. Even the so-called ‘Youth Park’ at Somerset is really meant for skaters and not youths in general.”

For Zhou Yang, a public space for youths should, ideally, be a place where they can express themselves freely. He cited the underpass at the Esplanade as a good example. Skaters, breakdancers and jugglers are known to hone their craft in the underground space. As part of his research, Zhou Yang spent quite a bit of his time with these passionate youths. “I realised that what youths really want is a sense of belonging, a place where they can interact, socialise and have fun,” he said.

These experiences inspired Zhou Yang to create “The Bonfire Bench” which, true to its name, mimics the experience of friends sitting around a bonfire. “The most distinct feature of a bonfire is the way it attracts people by light,” he explained. As such, “The Bonfire Bench” incorporates an intricately designed system of interactive lighting that can adjust its intensity based on environmental changes. As more people join in on a conversation around the exhibit, the stronger the light will glow, just like how a bonfire burns brighter as more wood is fed into the fire.

In today’s world where relationships are increasingly formed over cyberspace, Zhou Yang’s project also reminds us of the value in face-to-face conversation.
What is that smell?

Giving meaning and purpose to a public space goes beyond product design. Teo Ying Xuan’s project, titled “Atmosphere & Plants”, uses public spaces to give people a multi-sensory experience during festive seasons.

The idea for this project came about when she noticed how the heartlands in Singapore never seem to exude the same festive spirit as downtown areas like Orchard Road and Marina Bay.

“Yes, we have getai during the Hungry Ghost Festival, but those cater mostly to the older folks,” Ying Xuan said. Her project sought to inject vibrancy into the heartlands – using humble flora species.

For example, during Hari Raya Aidilfitri, pandan leaves will be planted in designated spots around the neighbourhood. As the wind blows, the fragrance of the leaves, a staple in Malay cuisine, will remind residents that Hari Raya is right around the corner. Similarly, during Deepavali, curry leaves will set off a distinct festive scent.

As part of her research, Teo painstakingly studied the lifespan of different plant species. “I want to allow residents to experience harvesting these plants on their way home during the holidays,” she said. “So, by studying their lifespan, I was able to create signs in the gardens to remind residents when the plants can be harvested.”

The choice of plants and timing to plant requires some strategy too. During Christmas and Chinese New Year, Ying Xuan plans to use the Murraya flowers and fruits as visual reminders of these seasons. Before Christmas, the Murraya plant will be planted on balconies and atop covered walkways in selected neighbourhoods. By Christmas time, the white flowers will bloom and drift downwards to mimic falling snow. When Chinese New Year comes around, the Murraya fruits will start to grow, resembling miniature versions of mandarin oranges.

“This point of my project is not to take the attention away from places like Orchard Road and Little India,” Teo explained. “I just think that these festive seasons should be celebrated by everybody, especially people living in the heartlands.”

By Chin Wei Lian

This article was first published in Going Places Singapore, an online magazine about appreciating our city anew. Visit www.goingplacesingapore.sg for more stories.
Tiong Bahru is well-loved by many Singaporeans and increasingly, overseas visitors as well. While the estate is more known for its lively café culture and local goodies at the Tiong Bahru Market & Food Centre, many of us are drawn to its unique architecture and streetscape. Twenty blocks of pre-war flats and 36 units of shophouses were conserved by URA in 2003 so that Tiong Bahru can continue to evolve with the assurance that the identity and charm of the area will be kept. Take a quick stroll with us as we point out to you the estate’s “Dancing Girl”, “aeroplane blocks” and more!