

Angelene Chan (b.1964)

by Lilian Chee

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Angelene Chan Li Chen broke the glass ceiling of Singaporean corporate architecture by becoming the first woman CEO of Singapore's biggest and the world's twelfth-largest architecture practice, DP Architects, in 2016. Malaysia-born Chan, who graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture (First Class Honors) from the University of Adelaide (1987), has thrice won Singapore's most prestigious design accolade: the President's Design Award for Design of the Year (2009 and 2015) and the Designer of the Year (2018). She received RBS Coutts's and *Financial Times's* "Women in Asia Award" for her professional achievements in 2010 and is on the advisory boards of several public institutions including the Singapore Board of Architects, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and the National University of Singapore. Refusing to define women architects by their gender disadvantages, Chan champions a supportive social framework and emphasizes work-life balance. She challenges a hard-nosed corporate environment with more intimate leadership, building DP Architects into a global brand, and often using her position, visibility, and experience to oppose the unequal recognition of women architects. Chan serves as a mentor in the Urban Land Institute Women's Leadership Initiative and the Young Women's Leadership Connection Mentorship Programme, platforms that promote the advancement of women in their professional careers.

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Cheong Koon Hean (b.1957)

by Lilian Chee

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A Singaporean architect, urban planner, and government official, Cheong Koon Hean is distinguished as the first and only woman to hold the highest leadership positions in urban development in Singapore. Having served as CEO of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) (2004–2010), the statutory board responsible for urban planning in Singapore, Cheong was in charge of the overall design of the Marina Bay, a city extension scheme on reclaimed land which, represents the city's signature skyline. As the former CEO of the Housing Development Board (HDB) (2010–2020), Singapore's statutory board overseeing the design of public housing, Cheong has been responsible for the building and management of over one million public housing apartments across Singapore. Unhindered by Singapore's male-dominated built environment sector, Cheong has served in numerous agencies concerned with city planning, including the Ministry of National Development (MND). She has been at the forefront of Singapore's urban transformation in the last two decades. Taking urban planning's long-term trajectory, Cheong's leadership is visionary and creative but grounded in policymaking experience. She emphasizes the significance of building on the work of her predecessors, works closely with the private sector, and creates collaborative and productive relationships across multiple government agencies.



Marina Bay, Singapore (ongoing). Architect: Cheong Koon Hean. Photograph: f11photo.
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Academic Background

Despite early ambitions to pursue only architecture, Cheong's formal training in architecture and urban planning enabled her complementary understanding of both disciplines. The recipient of the highly competitive international Colombo Plan Scholarship (1976), Cheong graduated with the highest accolades. She was awarded the Gold Medal and a first-class degree in architecture from the University of Newcastle in Australia in 1981. Initially reluctant to diversify, Cheong found her calling after completing a Master's degree in Urban Development Planning at the University College London (1981). She also completed the Advanced Management Programme at Harvard Business School (2007). In 2010, her alma mater, the University of Newcastle awarded her a Doctorate of Philosophy in Architecture (honorary) and the University's Convocation Medal for Professional Excellence for her outstanding achievements in steering Singapore's urban development toward a world-class city.

Contributions to Urban Planning and Public Housing in Singapore

Beyond infrastructural development, Cheong's planning approach focuses heavily on placemaking and innovations toward resolving land scarcity in Singapore. She was involved in rethinking the plan for Singapore when housing and unemployment issues were no longer imminent, and the island state's economy was ranked Asia's highest GDP per capita. Cheong worked intensively on the URA's 1991 Concept Plan, which guides the long-term strategic land use, infrastructural, and transport development. Titled *Living the Next Lap*, the 1991 plan focused on improving the quality of life, by balancing work, play, culture, and commerce. It superseded the first concept plan (1971), which conceptualized Singapore through a "Ring Plan" revolving around a centralized city core.

A key recommendation of the 1991 plan was to decentralize commercial centers around the island. This move aligned with the proposal to build ten new satellite towns to allow different parts of the island state to flourish. The decentralization brought jobs closer to home and reduced congestion in the city center. A number of initiatives from the 1991 Concept Plan have been impactful to Singapore's urban planning. These include establishing a connected network of green spaces and waterways; forging a stronger practice to conserve Singapore's built heritage; creating more spaces to cultivate the arts; connecting an integrated technological corridor of business and science parks with academic institutions to enable seamless collaborative research; and expanding the existing central business district to include the reclaimed Marina South area. Remarkably, Cheong was editing a draft of *Living The Next Lap* on the day she gave birth to her second child.

Overseeing the broad strokes, Cheong also paid attention to the granular strategies with her vision of a twenty-first-century tropical city, a visceral dimension focused on community-building and the everyday experience of these spaces. Since the 1990s, she championed the URA's conservation program, by focusing on a strategic balance between economic considerations and the need to safeguard Singapore's built heritage. Today, over 7,000 buildings are protected under this program.

During periods of economic uncertainty, further compounded by the 2003 SARS crisis in Asia, Cheong combined acute business acumen, strategic urban vision, and smart policymaking. She drew on public-private partnerships to invest in the Marina Bay city extension. To build investor confidence, she persuaded the Singapore government to develop Marina Bay's state-of-the-art infrastructure and to realize the 100 ha award-winning Gardens by the Bay. Cheong advocated greater flexibility in land use for businesses and proposed an innovative risk-sharing approach with investors, leading to successful projects like the Marina Bay Financial Centre. As part of placemaking, she also pushed for events to be actively organized in newly formed public spaces to increase city vibrancy. At Marina Bay, these events include the New Year countdown, and the Great Eastern Women 10K Run around the Bay. Today, Marina Bay's skyline is representative of Singapore's global city status.

As HDB's CEO, Cheong has ensured that urban planning and public housing prioritize high-quality living environments. Between 2010 and 2020, Cheong led a paradigm shift by introducing a new generation of smart, sustainable, and community-centric public housing. In 2020, she introduced a health and wellness focus, promoting resilience particularly with an aging population. Such innovative housing typologies have won accolades. A good example is the Kampung Admiralty Estate (2017), which integrates housing for the elderly and features a wide range of social, healthcare, commercial, and retail facilities. It won the World Architectural Festival's 2018 Building of the Year Award. Cheong's future-oriented approach is especially evidenced in the reconceptualization of public housing. Aligned with Singapore's ambitions to be a leading force in the design of smart cities, Cheong deployed strategies such as data analytics and computer simulations to improve public housing design; used sensor networks to capture real-time information about estates and developed smart public housing flats to facilitate the adoption of commercially developed applications, including elderly monitoring and utilities management systems. Articulating the centrality of placemaking and place management, Cheong also reaffirmed the importance of public and communal spaces to encourage community building.



The new generation of Singaporean public housing, Punggol, Singapore. Architect: Cheong Koon Hean. Photograph: ZDL. Image copyright: ZDL/Shutterstock.

Cheong has garnered international recognition, such as the International Women's Forum's 2011 "Women Who Make a Difference" award and the 2018 Asia-Pacific Landscape Architecture Luminary Award by the International Federation of Landscape Architects. In 2016, she was awarded the internationally based Urban Land Institute's (ULI) JC Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development, for reflecting the highest standards of the design and development, and the commitment to creating communities. In addition, the Chicago- and Shanghai-based Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat awarded her the Lynn S. Beedle Lifetime Achievement Award for her extraordinary contributions to the advancement of tall buildings and the urban environment. Consequently, Cheong became the first person globally, and a woman from an Asian country, to receive both awards in the same year.

Public Outreach and Scholarship

While her work primarily impacted policymaking, Cheong shared her experiences globally through numerous publications and public lectures. She was an invited speaker at the TEDx Singapore event (2015), where she discussed Singapore's development as a smart city and nation. She argued for a new definition of "urban regeneration," in an interview with the Centre for Liveable Cities (2018), extending the focus of "regeneration" to include a long-term vision for society and space. Cheong was also the first Singaporean woman to be appointed as the fifth SR Nathan Fellow of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies in 2018, and in this role, she reached out to her largest and most diverse audience. She delivered three lectures to policymakers and members of the public, addressing Singapore's urban planning from international, national, and heartland

perspectives. This culminated in a book titled *Seeking a Better Urban Future*, in which Cheong elucidates Singapore's strategies for future urban challenges including climate change, and adaptations required in public housing to meet the future needs of Singapore's emerging society.

Supporting future scholarship in urban planning, Cheong contributed her ULI prize money to establish the Cheong Koon Hean Scholarship in 2017 for students enrolled in urban design or urban planning degrees at the National University of Singapore. She also conceptualized the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize launched in 2009, and currently chairs its nominating committee. This biennial international award honors cities and their key leaders, who have created "liveable, vibrant and sustainable urban communities around the world." Cheong's personal commitment to a liveable city with a thriving society and culture, makes her vote matter.

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Pinna Indorf (b.1942)

by Lilian Chee

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A pioneering historian and world expert on ancient Southeast Asian Buddhist architecture, the American architect Pinna Indorf immigrated to Southeast Asia in the 1970s. A fluent Thai speaker, Indorf taught for more than two decades (1977–2002) at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Architecture (DoA) where she was made Associate Professor in 1997. Her research crossed disciplinary and historiographical boundaries long before such approaches became mainstream. She integrated the disciplines of architecture, cultural studies, and history; reconfigured the relationships between Buddhist and Hindu architecture; and amalgamated South and Southeast Asian Studies. Prior to joining academia, Indorf practiced in New York (1969–1970) with Richard Meier and in Bangkok (1968–1977) first with Sumet, Likit, Tri, and Associates (through DEC Consultants), and later with M.L. Tri Devakul Architects. Under the celebrated Thai architect Sumet Jumsai, she worked on Bangkok's British Council Building (1970).

Indorf's publications demonstrate her in-depth engagement with Southeast Asian Buddhist architecture and commitment to cross-disciplinary approaches. Her PhD dissertation (1985), a multivolume work of over 800 pages, is unprecedented in attempting to unearth the ancient Indian canonical prototypes on which Buddhist monastery designs were based. Her study of Southeast Asia's Theravada Buddhist monasteries argues that Thai wat (monastery) designs were shaped by the Pali Canon (fifth-century BCE Theravada texts from South Asia) and local cultural influences. Opposing the overly art historical approaches prevalent at the time, Indorf's 1991 paper advocated instead that Buddhist architecture be read through architectural lenses, rather than "merely as objects representing an extension of an artistic tradition." Wresting Buddhist architecture back from art historical studies, Indorf advocated the use of Buddhist conceptual models including a range of architectural prototypes including the Prasada (stepped multistoried forms), courtyards, and stupas (reliquary monuments) as modes to analyze Buddhist architecture.

Indorf's architectural research crosses regional and historiographical boundaries. Rather than limiting her work to the Theravada Buddhist world of Mainland Southeast Asia, she studies Srivijaya, the first-millennium Buddhist polity located in Island Southeast Asia—demonstrating a regional breadth that even scholars of Southeast Asian Studies rarely match. Indorf's research eventually broadened out into Hindu architecture, where in 2004, she proposed a five-faceted model for analyzing the structure of Hindu temples. Her research is impactful and lays the groundwork for future scholars in Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist architectural history. Indorf's funded research projects include a glossary of Southeast Asian traditional architecture and a comparative analysis of *Pañcāyatana* (five-part) shrines in South and Southeast Asia. She has also published a Southeast Asian corpus of historical shrines from the eighth to tenth centuries, and a typological documentation of shrines at Bagan (an ancient city in modern-day Myanmar).

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Koh-Lim Wen Gin (b.1945)

by Lilian Chee

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Koh-Lim Wen Gin is the first woman to be appointed Chief Planner, and Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Physical Planning and Conservation & Urban Design) (2001–2008), of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Singapore's national urban planning body. Unhindered by a male-dominated culture characteristic of statutory boards in postindependence Singapore throughout her long URA tenure (1974–2008), Koh-Lim's leadership transformed Singapore with her distinctive redevelopment, conservation, rehabilitation, and reclamation strategies. A passionate proponent of local architectural talent, Koh-Lim mooted the URA's Architecture & Urban Design Excellence (AUDE) program to recognize, support, and promote young architects in Singapore. Under that program, she also directed the publication of the *20 Under 45* book series (2004).

Graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Singapore (1971), Kuala Lumpur-born Koh-Lim worked in private practice before joining the URA in 1974. She was drawn to the URA's vision of expanding Singapore's architecture and infrastructure as contemporary counterpoints to its colonial quarters. Koh-Lim's first assignment was the reclamation of Marina Bay. At the time, the reclamation and transformation of the bay into a freshwater lake was considered technologically impossible. Her team capitalized the bay's visibility, prepared detailed urban design guidelines, and established design review processes to construct an imageable skyline, which became Singapore's brand image with Marina Bay's partial completion in 2010. She also led the 2008 Statutory Master Plan of Singapore, championing an enhanced built environment to increase the city dwellers' quality of life through the inclusion of parklands, natural areas, water bodies, and a 150-km round-island route. The 2008 Plan was significant for how it conceptualized and strategically embedded green areas into everyday commuter routes and routines, as well as designing these for leisure.

As URA's officer-in-charge of planning, urban design, and conservation of Singapore's city center (1982–2001), Koh-Lim's proactive conservation of the city's built heritage constituted a paradigm shift, pushing back against the late 1960s URA's isolated attempts to conserve, and its widespread demolition of Singapore's over cluttered central area. Facilitating the city center's sustainable development through the 1985 Central Area Structure Plan (CASP), a framework that balanced the conservation of low-rise built heritage including shophouses, with the construction of dense, high-rise developments, Koh-Lim constructed a legal framework for conservation when the CASP evolved into Singapore's first Conservation Master Plan (CMP) in 1989. Subsequently, as Chief Planner, she emphasized that conservation meant not just retaining buildings but also creating opportunities for occupants to continue their livelihoods within existing localities. Today, this conservation program covers more than 7,000 heritage buildings in Singapore.

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Ong Siew May (1937-1999)

Asia

by Lilian Chee

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Ong Siew May (née Ling) was co-founder and principal partner of Ong & Ong Architects & Town Planners. Founded in 1972, Ong took over the company in 1975—then renamed ONG & ONG Architects—growing the practice to 80 employees and 200 completed projects by 1999. Beyond her professional life as an architect, Ong was also a prominent public figure, thrust further into the spotlight when she became Singapore's First Lady, supporting her husband Ong Teng Cheong through his presidency from 1993 until her passing.

Ong studied at the University of Adelaide, graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture in 1963—the first Asian woman to do so. Ong was a detail-oriented architect. She was fascinated by the intricacies of putting a building together and paid attention to the profession's more mundane and unseen facets. Such was Ong's attitude working on the conservation of CHIJMES, the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus on Victoria Street. Through Ong's leadership, the historical grounds, constructed in 1852, were preserved and restored with care and sensitivity. Instead of being replaced, dilapidated elements like the stained glass were sent back to Lyon for restoration. The project won numerous awards, including the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Conservation Award in 2002. Ong also designed a new campus of 36,400 sqm for her alma mater, Nanyang Girls' High School. Amidst the campus's construction in 1997, Ong was diagnosed with colon cancer. Despite this, she continued working ceaselessly through her illness, seeing her final project through to completion.

As a public figure, Ong made significant social contributions to Singapore through philanthropy and other avenues of public life, including specific contributions to the architecture community in Singapore. In 1997, to commemorate ONG & ONG Architect's 25th anniversary, Ong started the ONG&ONG Traveling Fellowship with a donation of \$250,000, giving Singaporean architecture students an opportunity to travel around the world in the vein of the Prix de Rome. Posthumously, Ong's friends and family raised a sum of 2.2 million to establish the Ong Siew May Professorship in Architecture at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in her honor. The program enables the university to bring in internationally renowned academics and practitioners in architecture to conduct studios and lectures at NUS. Alongside the Ong Siew May Distinguished Lecture Series, the professorship has to date brought the likes of Kazuyo Sejima, Ryue Nishizawa, Huat Lim, Rick Joy, Marc Simmons, Winy Maas, Colin Fournier, Christine Hawley, and CJ Lim through NUS's halls.

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Tse Swee Ling (b.1944)

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Tse Swee Ling is a Singaporean architect and an award-winning educator who bridged academia and building legislation through her research in architectural materials and detailing a field that was male-dominated, and where women were often relegated to the task of reproducing such details on the drafting board. She taught for nearly four decades at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Architecture (1977–2016). Graduating from the Singapore Polytechnic with a Diploma in Architecture in 1969, Tse began her career in practice with Architects Team 3. Displaying remarkable career mobility for a woman of her generation, Tse subsequently joined NUS in 1977, where she rose to the ranks of Associate Professor in 2000. At the time, the question of gender balance was not on the agenda, and she remained for approximately a decade, one of only several women professors in the department.

Tse advocated forward-looking construction practices in Singapore, long before these became mainstream. She recognized that Singapore's construction industry lacked a professional code of standards. In a 1996 paper she coauthored and piloted an online database for construction studies at NUS, tailored to local construction conditions and practice. Another 2004 paper reflected on the use of prefabrication technology in public housing which has since become mainstream practice in Singapore. She also preemptively highlighted the role that high-rise public housing could play in maintaining a sustainable tropical ecology through its reduced footprint and examined the creation of ecologically responsible towns in Singapore.

Tse worked closely with Singapore's Building and Construction Authority (BCA) to align building standards and building codes with emergent needs. She was involved in systemizing Singapore's building standards for Universal Design, with her research published as the BCA's Universal Design Guidelines (2006). To recognize her contribution to nation-building, design education, and in developing Singapore's design sector, the DesignSingapore Council awarded Tse the Singapore Design Golden Jubilee Award in 2015. Through this award, Tse was formally recognized as one of Singapore's seventy earliest designers and pioneering design educators.

Tse is one of few pioneer women architects whose dual contributions to Singapore's architectural education and its built environment—particularly through her expertise in construction—have raised the bar for women architects, despite her reticence at being cast at the forefront of both endeavors.

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Rita Soh (b.1959)

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The Singaporean architect Rita Soh Siow Lan, who holds a Bachelor of Architecture (Honors) from the National University of Singapore (1987) and a Master of Science (Sustainable Building Design) from the University of Nottingham UK (2011), is distinguished by her professional leadership roles on both Singaporean and Asian fronts. Beyond breaking the gender leadership stereotype, she has advanced the causes of professional ethics and collaborative partnership. The first woman President of the Singapore Institute of Architects (2004–2007), Soh standardized Singapore's architectural nomenclature by creating Singapore's own Code of Practice and pushed the architectural body toward digitalization of its professional services. As President of Singapore's Board of Architects (2010–2015), she championed ethical architectural practice. In her current position as President (2019–2021) of the Architects Regional Council, Asia (ARCASIA), Soh strives to foster closer collaborations among architects across Asia and to define global benchmarks from Asian perspectives. While a Nominated Member (2014–2015) of Singapore's largely male Parliament, Soh advocated reducing Singapore architecture's carbon footprint and urged an expansion of healthcare infrastructure to cater for an aging population. She was involved in the remodeling of two state-owned hospitals (2015) and won the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Architectural Heritage Award (2016) for restorations of a national monument. Soh is Managing Director at Regional Development Consortium (RDC) Architects Pte Ltd.

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