

Creative Cross-Pollination

The Singapore Supergarden at the Venice Biennale

The Singapore Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale departs from the tried and tested formula of showcasing iconic architectural projects. Instead, it trains its focus on the often overlooked design collaboration and process. **Peter Sim** and **Tan Szue Hann** reflect on the real meaning behind practice.





An Ongoing Conversation

Introduction by Tan Szue Hann

This piece brings to light the curatorial decisions and experiences behind the *Singapore Supergarden*, the city-state's entry for this year's Venice Biennale exposition. Highlighting the works of young Singaporean architects, with artists, curators and graphic, fashion and industrial designers, it showcases an emergent architectural community – a hybrid that finds itself within a design environment, characterised by an uninhibited exchange of ideas between creative practices, and smudging the previously-thick boundaries between different design genres.

Singapore Supergarden – an alliteration in its own right, whose words conjure up thoughts of lush plant ecosystems and vibrant colours – is an exhibition of Singapore's design culture which, to the curators FARM, DesignACT and [re:act], has become non-exclusive and seemingly all-encompassing.

Perhaps this is the curators' interpretation of "Architecture Beyond Building", the exposition-wide theme that architecture has gone beyond its perceived picket-fences of a singular profession;

above Garden of the Istituto Provinciale per l'Infanzia

opposite Entrance display for Singapore Supergarden



that it is about time other creative faculties are embraced in our quest for “good architecture”. That is to say, going “beyond building” by questioning the practice itself, thus saying “How else do, or *could*, architects work?”, rather than interpreting architecture as *non-building*. The latter is a strategy that, as a feature article on the Venice Biennale within these pages has illustrated, has been adopted by many other nations’ pavilions this year.

While close-walled in terms of exhibit selection – most of the designers who exhibited are personal and professional contacts of the curators – there is still a cornucopia of multi-disciplinary design endeavours being represented. One could applaud the shift in direction that the DesignSingapore commissioning panel and the curators have taken, resulting in a pavilion that is, if anything, refreshingly different from its local predecessors (in 2004 and 2006, which were clinical showcases of good architectural work in Singapore) and its international peers.

And different it is. It shuns the highly tectonic and interactive-media-heavy installations that other “non-building” pavilions were obsessing over, and instead looks at a fundamental question that architects, mired in the throes of professional practice, tend to forget – “How *could* architects operate?”

The result might be seen as an eclectic hodgepodge, resulting in the pavilion lacking any cogent style – each displayed object, of which there are twenty-two, bears little visual testimony of trying to work with one another. This, however, gives cues to the way the exhibits are meant to be read – or heard.

The engendered, recorded conversations of the designers of these displayed objects, elaborated in the curator’s account below, bring the objects to life; listening in to the private banter of the designers leads one to question about the way architecture is being practised in Singapore.

(He may not quite find the answers so soon, but he is let in on a closed “local” discussion, as if privy to a private joke.)

Best described as a work-in-progress – or, as the case might be, an ongoing conversation – *Singapore Supergarden* might come across as being hastily tilled, possibly resulting from a rather late curatorial appointment and changes in the pavilion design a month before it was due. Yet, it teems with colour and embedded energy, and that it was successfully executed in the light of time and curatorial constraints is highly commendable. In this respect, it achieves what it sets out to do: introduce to the world a creative culture that continually aspires to show, exchange and symbiotically grow.

We may not have seen the results yet, but these could well be the signs of growth – signs that are encouraging.



Changing the Agenda Curating the Supergarden

Text by Peter Sim

The Singapore Pavilion is something of a misnomer, not being a purpose-built, freestanding structure or building. Singapore's 'Pavilion' is housed in a charming old Venetian building tucked in a typically cramped urban block a little east of Piazza San Marco, and a short distance from the Arsenale.

Singapore Supergarden is Singapore's third outing to the Venice Biennale. The previous pavilions, *Second Nature* and *Singapore: Built and Unbuilt*, both showcased iconic, ambitious and award-winning contemporary architectural projects. This time round, in response to the biennale theme, "Architecture Beyond Building", the pavilion looks at Singapore's idiosyncratic emerging design culture.

Visionaries and social commentators alike predict a future for architecture highly augmented by new technology; both with regards to the softer aspects: robotics, electronics, projections, sensors, monitors; and those more traditionally associated with the building: newer, greener, stronger, lighter, cheaper materials and methods. However, the information age is as much an ideological shift as it is a technological one. The ways in which

we view information and give value to things have also been influenced by the technology we embrace. The ease at which images and ideas are consumed and assimilated, and the lack of their hierarchy has resulted in a horizontal structure or network of influences, one where architecture's autonomy and boundaries are becoming increasingly porous. Such permeable exchange can only be a good thing.

Significantly, there is a new generation of architects and designers in Singapore who have known only this horizontal field. It is precisely due to this condition that they are beginning to produce some of the most promising work. As far as commodities go, experience and hindsight are probably two of the most valued aspects in the practice of architecture. However, there are times when the opposite can form an equally compelling argument. It is the courage – or naivety – to try anything, and an openness to cross-disciplinary communication which feeds a buzzing optimism. Such openness is becoming hugely infectious in this small city.

Objects of Conversation, Fields of Exchange

The main focus of the 2008 Singapore pavilion is a long table – "grassed over", as it were – which stretches across an entire length of a quiet room. The room opens onto a Venetian canal on one end and belongs to the compound

this spread Whimsical free standing "Cloud" structures in the forecourt garden hold books and gifts for the visitor.



of a women's institute and orphanage. On this table, twenty-two objects of different materials and scales are displayed. The objects are contributed by twenty-two artists and designers. They include drawings, models, fabric, books, household appliances, electronic devices, furniture, photographs, games and postcards. Each object is accompanied by a series of recorded conversations which document an exchange of opinions, ideas and critiques between the contributor and other designers. These conversations emanate from specially constructed sound domes that hover above the audience. The sound domes create a wonderfully symphonic banter of design ideas. The soundscape is a great surprise for the visitor who has just entered a typically peaceful Venetian courtyard.

Together, the enmeshed soundscape and visual landscape of objects create fresh and unseen connections between emerging Singaporean architects and designers. For the visitor standing under a sound dome, it is like being up close and personal with the designer. Or it feels like one is suddenly privy to a private conversation. The intention of this exhibition-installation is to emphasise two extreme but related scales – community and individuality, the 'big picture' and the intimate. The framework for this installation is conversation or informative chit-chat, perhaps borrowing from the structure of *pecha kucha*.

The goals of the Singapore pavilion 2008 are modest. It attempts to present a slice of design culture in this country at a transitional moment when the potential for new ideas is immense, probably surpassing what the present group of architects and designers can fully fathom. Indeed knowledge of this creative propensity is now only becoming more obvious and organized through deliberate efforts of self-curation, contemplation and critique. This exhibition is one representation of such efforts. Thus, what the pavilion promises is not an array of gleaming buildings. Instead, it hopes to offer an honest – if still slightly chaotic – glimpse into the energetic, poetic, and serendipitous conditions which have galvanised a new cohort of architects and designers, and generated an exciting cauldron of ideas, objects and conversations. No longer exclusively pegged to a nationalist agenda, the pavilion does not make claims towards having definitive formulations

of Singaporean design identity. Rather, it presents swirling, and still open-ended patterns of creative association, experimentation, collaboration and competition.

Like the noisy design banter experienced in the room of twenty-two objects, contemporary Singaporean architecture and design are evolving. It is moving on – beyond building towards activism, curation, policy-making and criticism, amongst others. While the current efforts may not exactly resemble the work of Singapore's first generation activist architects from the 1960s (which gave us fiery organisations such as SPUR), it is still motivated by a similar restlessness and unrelenting questioning about architecture's capacity to affect society. Its mechanism today is influenced by the internet, by collaborative networks and by a society which is much more informed and keyed into design. The process of redefining Singapore architecture can be slow, dissipated and messy, as much as it can appear momentous and exciting. It is about trying to understand what it *really* means to be practising architecture in Singapore today. Singapore architecture can no longer be derivative of the old if it hopes to survive. It can also no longer afford to be hermetic. Then, apart from questioning architecture's disciplinary limits, it also has to do with some serious soul-searching.

These are, of course, huge demands which *Supergarden* cannot declare to have adequately addressed. Yet, the Singapore pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year has broken new ground. It has begun to re-think the structures which will support a more robust version of architecture and design. This is a scene where architectural practice is contextually grounded in a more fluid, tentative and open identitarian politics. It is where, one hopes, architecture can truly make a difference, and doing architecture can be new, surprising and inventive once more. ■

opposite "Grassed over"
display table with sound domes

Project Information

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