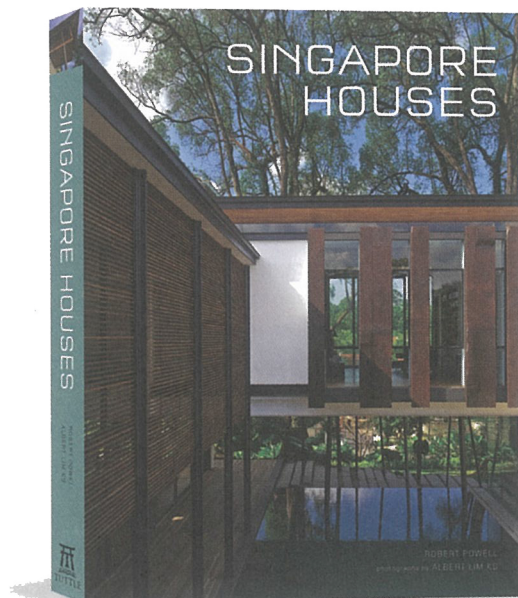




MAGICAL LIVING

Book Review: *Singapore Houses*

In this review of Robert Powell's new book, Lilian Chee examines the evolution of the private house typology that is shaped by three generations of Singaporean architects.

Even while the scale, complexity and spectacular nature of public buildings appear to take centre stage in architectural publications, the intimacy, privacy and otherness of the family home still sustain intractable interest. The home has served as an amenable, if not also malleable platform for many perspectives—ideological, theoretical, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, experimental, social, cultural, and historical. And while it may be convenient to neatly separate the family home from the public realm, Jürgen Habermas in his study of the eighteenth-century capitalist city, has argued that the autonomous space of home which cultivates and gives form to the subjective individual, is inextricably linked to the public sphere; in other words, "... it was a private autonomy denying its economic origins ... that provided the bourgeois family with its consciousness of itself."¹ Significantly, Habermas reminds us that the bourgeois family played a definitive role in the "reproduction of capital."²

It is from this interdependent perspective between public and private spheres that I would like to position Robert Powell's latest book on Singapore houses. An architect, former academic, urbanist and writer who spent 17 years living, working and teaching in Singapore, Powell's insights into the island state's architectural development was considerably sharpened on two counts—through an

ABOVE Jacket for *Singapore Houses* hardcover, featuring Ko Shiu Hee's (K2LD Architects) *Landscape House*.

OPPOSITE Kerry Hill (Kerry Hill Architects), *Garlick Avenue House*. Layered and parallel volumes.



intentionally externalised expatriate status, and in his professional capacities as a design tutor at the National University of Singapore, and a writer whose interest in the region's architecture resulted in a prolific output of essays, monographs and edited books. The distinctive tone of these publications straddles between the scholarly and the popular, a mode of address, which is more or less maintained in Powell's newest volume. As the writer notes, Singapore in 1984, the year he arrived, was a different place in time.³ The city's mass rapid transit system was under construction, its ethnic enclaves were not yet gentrified, and the island's northern reaches was thickly overgrown and dotted with vast mangrove swamps and *kampongs* (Malay for "village").

Powell's early writings focused on the region's identity mapped through its architectural projects. As an editor for the books published under the auspices of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, broad emergent issues on regionalism, Southeast Asian identity, housing for the masses, heritage conservation and the design of public spaces were of primary concern. Around the same time, Powell became aligned with two of Singapore's foremost post-independence architects, William S W Lim and Tay Kheng Soon. Lim and Tay, both staunch critics in their own right, subsequently acted as Powell's collaborator and patron, and introduced the writer to

an elite circle of stellar architects working at the edge of their profession both in Singapore and around the region.

Ostensibly continuing the familiar theme of the Asian tropical urban house, under which at least four other books have been published, *Singapore Houses* however marks a fundamental shift away from the previously broad-based perspectives of the Asian house, to focus on a particular species—the Singapore variety.⁴ Published, as the writer himself notes, to reflect the houses of the twenty-first century, and to introduce a new crop of local talent, *Singapore Houses* may be read as an initial attempt to systematically catalogue and theorise the city's private house typologies. The book is also distinct in its specific references to a cast of Singapore academics, architects and patrons, through whose intertwined web of connections Powell begins to construct an emergent genealogy of the private house (pp.11-15).

Contrary to his previous books where the house is primarily contextualised against its physical, social and architectural settings, *Singapore Houses* is structured around several pedigree lineages, mostly stemming from the city's three architectural doyens—Lim who headed William Lim Associates (1981-2003), Tay who headed Akitek Tenggara (since 1976), and Tang Guan Bee of TANGGUANBEE Archi-

tects (since 1983).⁵ The book consciously introduces three generations of architects, represented by the likes of Sonny Chan and Kerry Hill (comprising the first generation); Ernesto Bedmar, Chan Soo Khian, Ko Shiou Hee, Lim Cheng Kooi, Mok Wei Wei, Siew Man Kok, Kevin Tan, Tan Kok Hiang, Rene Tan, Teh Joo Heng, Toh Yiu Kwong, Wong Mun Summ, Richard Hassell, and Yip Yuen Hong (representing what Powell calls the "Next Generation," p11); and the newest faces in Singapore's architectural scene—Brenda Ang, Randy Chan, Chang Yong Ter, Ling Hao, Alan Tay, Gwen Tan, Berlin Lee and Seetoh Kum Loon. Powell describes that for each generation, a different preoccupation is taken up and worked through (or against), thus shaping the range of emergent architectures. These concerns include the early emphasis on identity, which was later superseded by experiments with materiality, climate, sustainability, and personal narrative (p.11).

In itself, the book is a formidable achievement. It painstakingly documents, through researched texts, firsthand visits and interviews, meticulous line drawings and seductive full colour photographs, an important historical milieu of conspicuous consumption, buoyed by the island's globally recognised position and its fiercely protected economic structure. The reader gains access to a series of otherwise "invisible" properties—bungalows and terrace

The result is a beautiful book—liberally complemented by images, exact in its textual density, and strategic in “blank” intervals where the reader is given time to mull over what could conversely turn out to be too much of a good thing.



houses—often hidden from the public eye because of their exclusive locations in Bukit Timah, Sentosa, Tanglin and Dalvey Estate. While Powell’s writing brings us closer to the architect’s main ideas, it is ultimately Albert Lim Koon Seng’s evocative images, which draw one experientially into the interiors of these private homes. Lim, a top architectural photographer and also Powell’s longtime collaborator, sensitively constructs a visual essay, which works contrapuntally with the architectural commentary, filling in gaps and extending key ideas. The result is a beautiful book—liberally complemented by images, exact in its textual density, and strategic in “blank” intervals where the reader is given time to mull over what could conversely turn out to be too much of a good thing.

Yet, *Singapore Houses* does raise certain difficult questions, which Powell himself begins to intimate, but does not adequately flesh out in his introductory essay to the volume. While it is easy to fetishise these houses as privileged standalone objects in the landscape, one is reminded that the private house, as Habermas argues, is inextricable from the public sphere it inscribes. In a city where land is scarce and more than 80 percent of the population live in public housing, the luxury of space portrayed in these houses seems almost impossible. The architecture in turn, rather than pushing the limits of residential typology, may be seen as remote and rarified versions only available to the very rich. Also, the double effect of a genealogical framework is that it both institutes a material continuity and maintains an illusion of one. Undoubtedly, the houses’ polished aesthetics, consistent use of specific materials (for example, timber, marble, granite, greenery), and reverence to particular “schools” (for example, modernist, urban vernacular, “cool” Japanese, Brutalist, post-modernist) suggest that they are ultimately connected—no matter how different their motivations—in terms of design influence, ideology and pedagogy. However, conversely, it may also be true that this similarity is evident because architecture, like art, is instrumental in defining and maintaining class status, and hence seen by many, as a dependable indicator of subjective taste. Thus, this cycle inevitably reproduces versions of the same, as patrons demand for this or that house, which is aligned with such and such status quo.

Notwithstanding these issues, the remit of *Singapore Houses* is probably much more precise. It aims to deliver a genealogy of groundbreaking house designs by Singapore’s leading architects in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This it does. For this reviewer, it was the unexpected yet subtle interventions from the norm—for example, Chang Yong Ter’s clever reinvention of the narrow intermediate terrace; Sonny Chan’s use of cool off-form concrete; Kerry Hill’s finely calibrated plans; Ling Hao’s precise understanding of occupancy; and Randy Chan’s unusual interpretation of site—which stand out.

Singapore Houses may be read, on the one hand, as Powell’s ode to this small nation state: a country with an amazing talent pool “producing work with a level of refinement and sophistication that is comparable with the best in the world.” (p.8) On the other hand, houses also capture our imagination because we—whether we have lived in one or not—understand their significance as spaces which offer shelter, privacy and reverie. They are where we grow up, start a family, and grow old. They are where we rest, retreat, and return to. A house is real but it is also a dream space, a place to imagine a possible future, and to keep a past life safe. Hence, beyond typologies and genealogies, and beyond design and taste, or worries about consumption and sustainability, *Singapore Houses* is worth reading if only because it demonstrates the material possibility of a familiar yet sometimes also magical space which we all call home. ■

Singapore Houses, published by Tuttle Publishing, is available for S\$75 (without GST) in all good bookstores.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, c.1962), p.46.

² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 47.

³ Robert Powell, lecture at Singapore’s National Library, 11 June 2009.

⁴ Powell’s other books include *Tropical Asian House* (1998), *The Urban Asian House* (1998), *The Asian House* (1999), and *The New Asian House* (2005).

⁵ Powell has helpfully drawn up a chart titled ‘Tracing the roots of innovation in Singapore’s residential architecture 1960–2009’, pp.238–9. The other pioneering firms include EJ Seow Associates, Malayan Architects Co-Partnership, Alfred Wong Partnership, Architects Team 3, Design Partnership and Kumpulan Akitek.

TOP Sonny Chan (Chan Sau Yan Associates), 2Q Bishopsgate. Distinctive use of off-form concrete for the walls.

OPPOSITE Randy Chan (Zarch collaboratives), Kampong Chantek House. Twisted geometries set up a tense dialogue between the staircase, reception and living space.

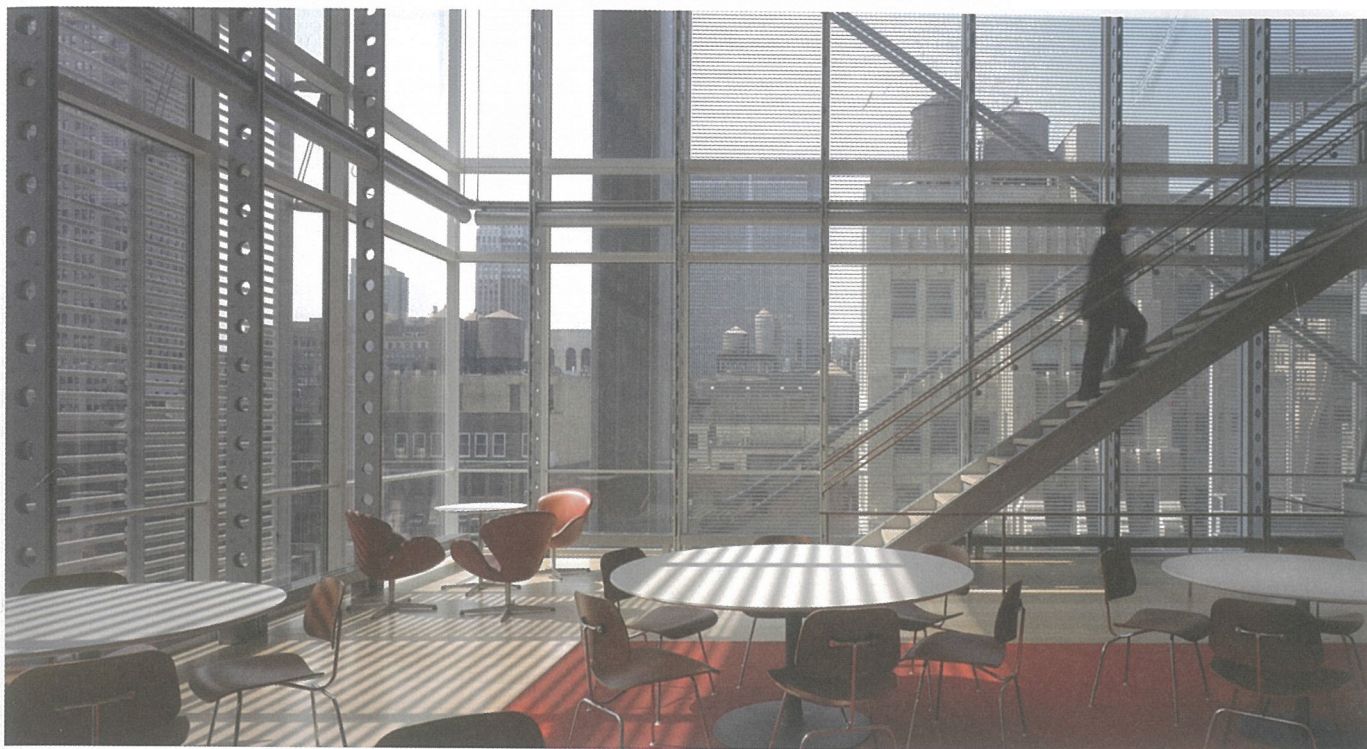




TOP, RIGHT Formwerkz Architects, *Alleyway House*. A house built around three dogs and two birds, features an aviary at its core.

TOP, LEFT Chang Yong Ter (CHANG Architects), *Jalan Elok House*. Slim trunks of the Brazilian tree fern grow from the entrance lobby/kitchen through apertures in the roof.

BOTTOM Ling Hao, (Linghao Architects), *Braemar Drive House*. The robust façade features bold concrete slabs and steel mesh, while the lively interiors are customised for its occupants who used to live in a former house on the same site.



Lutron Unveils Quantum™ Total Light Management System - Cuts Energy Usage by 60% in Commercial Buildings

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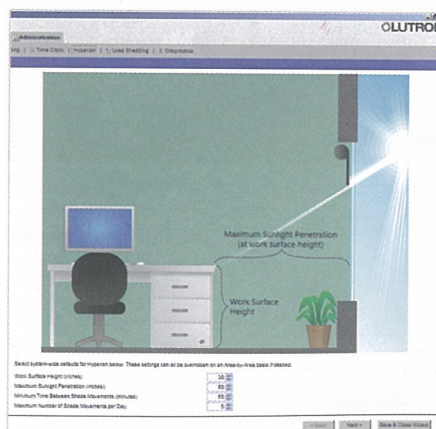
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FEG INDOOR WARDROBES

FEG was founded in 1948 as a craftsmen's workshop. In the 1960s, the firm became an industrial mass-producer of furniture, with a 120,000 sq. m. factory located in Brianza, the heart of an area that specializes in producing quality furniture. FEG focused on covering all types of home furnishing including wardrobe systems. The aesthetic range of wardrobe system consists of walk-in wardrobes and indoor wardrobes, with an exhaustive selection of finishes.

At FEG, the careful selection of materials, precise cabinet-making and tailored procedures performed on wood, and advanced technology marked the first step towards quality. Attention is also given to the development of the product, in making sure that each furnishing project allows every person to experience his or her very own domestic environment in safety, security and elegance. Every piece of furniture has hidden elements that one may not think about but that are fundamental, like the doors hinges or the drawer runners. All the hardware used meets the highest European standards. FEG also pays special attention to the growing

demand for environmental protection, so it produces furniture which fully respects the principles of sustainable growth.

There are more than 10 indoor wardrobes, with the flexibility of choosing different handles. Class, the latest to the collections, is an elegant designed wardrobe with sliding doors.

At the centre of Feg's night zone, there is Indoor, a modular system which combines design and function, originality and simplicity, searched for materials and technical innovation. A programme brimming with design contents and versatile solutions, created to express the latest design trends using personal and constructive language. The Indoor project is characterised by the study of the doors, in precious essences, lacquered or glass, by the particular workmanship and by a series of handles, external or fitted, which are divided among the extensive vertical surfaces, giving visible rhythm to the compositions.

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PORTEO door assistant – DORMA

Hygienic contactless door operation helps avoid infection.

DORMA's PORTEO door assistant is the company's response to H1N1 and other contagious diseases.

Hygienic contactless door operation helps avoid infection. DORMA's PORTEO door assistant is the company's response to H1N1 and other contagious diseases. <sub title, italics>

Who does not know this situation? After washing your hands, you still have to operate a lever handle or door knob in order to be able to leave the WC. And in the flick of a wrist, all that hygienic effort is nullified. However, given the increasing frequency with which pandemics appear to be occurring, hygiene as a means of infection prevention is more important than ever. This applies particularly to architectural hardware components such as door fittings, because smear infection, i.e. hand contact with infectious particles, constitutes one of the greatest sources of transmission for most contagious diseases. Operators of buildings subjected to and indeed reliant on brisk public footfall such as hotels, restaurants and other hospitality

establishments, sports facilities and swimming pools, not to mention schools and kindergartens are therefore facing an ever-growing challenge when it comes to keeping one step ahead in the hygiene stakes. The sterility of rooms in doctors' clinics and hospitals is also enhanced through the intelligent use of modern door systems such as the PORTEO door assistant from DORMA.

For single-leaf interior swing doors, this automatic operator combined with a Magic Switch proximity activator mounted on the wall enables the opening and closing cycles to be activated without physical contact. The hand merely needs to be waved to within 10 and 50 cm of the wall sensor. The difference with respect to conventional sensors is that the door is invariably opened only when this is specifically required, avoiding the constant opening and closing that occurs when there is a high level of passing public traffic. The PORTEO system

comprises a plug-and-go drive unit of stylish, elegant design available in either white or silver. The opening time and angle can be individually adjusted, as can the hold-open time.

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TOP No touching: The Magic Switch wall sensor responds to the wave of a hand at a distance of 10-50 cm. The door opens and closes automatically.

INSET Even in the waiting rooms of doctors' clinics, the PORTEO door assistant from DORMA enables the door to be operated without physical contact for maximum hygiene.