



BUILDING SINGAPORE WITH YU SIANG



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BY AMIRAH LIYANA REDUWAN

Mr Teo Yu Siang, 24, is a final year student in the accountancy school at National University of Singapore.

While he is at it, he picked up graphic design and coding on his own.

In celebration of Singapore's 50th birthday, Mr Teo went on a journey to uncover unknown history nuggets and presented it in a series of 50 detailed illustrations.

Let's hear what he has to say about "Building Singapore".

Describe "Building Singapore" in five words.



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

How did you select the 50 buildings for the project, and what was your research process like?

"I wanted a good mix of buildings in the project – some famous, some forgotten and unknown – to showcase the diversity of cultures and histories in Singapore. I chose the buildings based on how they reflect important social issues, or if they have interesting architectural or historical features.

There are a few phases to my research for each building. The first phase involves discovering buildings to be included in the project. Most of the iconic landmarks in the project skip this step, since they're so well known. But for the other buildings, I'll search online and try to find buildings with interesting stories or that can be tied to issues like our multiculturalism, meritocracy or income gap.

The next phase involves a visual research, and it's here where I look up for images of the building as reference for the illustration.

The final phase of research happens after the illustration is done, when I'm writing the accompanying description for each building. As much as possible, I'll find multiple sources to corroborate the information I find online. I learnt the most in this project in this stage of research, because I usually uncover many histories that are forgotten and buried over time."

Why the minimalism approach?

"The minimalism found in the illustrations is my style of design. I find portraying immense details through simple, flat graphics a nice and interesting paradox. To be honest, I was initially inspired by the art direction in Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* - the flatness of the colours and the amazingly-intricate details on the hotel facade."

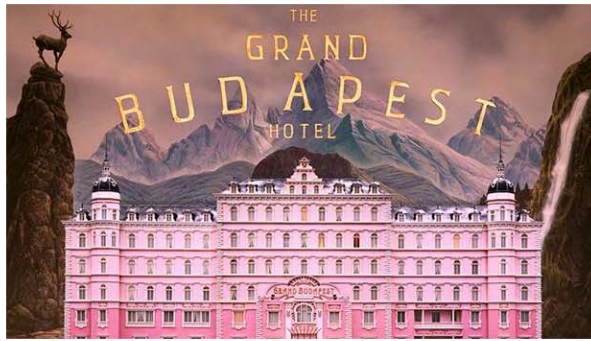


PHOTO: YOUTUBE



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

Which was the most challenging building to illustrate, and why? Which was the simplest?

"The most challenging building to illustrate was Parkview Square, because of its intricate Art Deco patterns and details. But as a result, it's one of my favourite buildings in the project due its sheer complexity and detail.



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

38 Oxley Road came close to being the most challenging as well, but this time it's because of the lack of photos depicting the building. I had to do a fair amount of guesswork to create the building based on 2 photos shot from different angles I found online.



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

The simplest building has to be the "Rainbow HDB", because of the simplicity of the utilitarian design of the HDB block."



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

What has the response been liked to the project - both in terms of comments and pre-orders for the postcards?

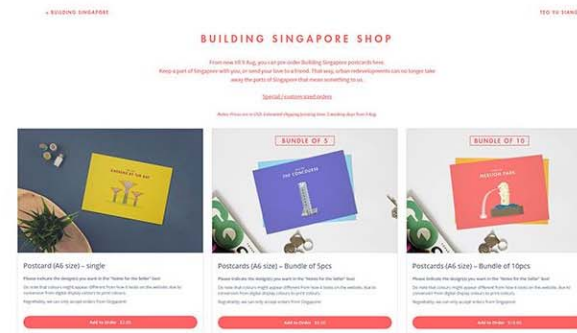


PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

"So far I've received pretty positive responses! I'm glad that many found that the project resonated with them, and that the social issues that were explored are relevant.

I've received a fair amount of pre-orders for the postcards as well – not overwhelming, but more than I'd expected. And a number of people are also interested in getting a large poster with all 50 buildings in it!"

Available [here](#).

"It's an SG50 celebration that's a little more introspective, because we can – and should – celebrate what we've achieved thus far and at the same time be aware of our flaws and the alternative narratives that drive our histories. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, a new building is explored, some with delightful back stories, and others that touch on issues like meritocracy and the cost of economic progress."

Can you elaborate on your decision to include buildings with a "darker" history, for example Cinnamon Collage, NUS University Town?

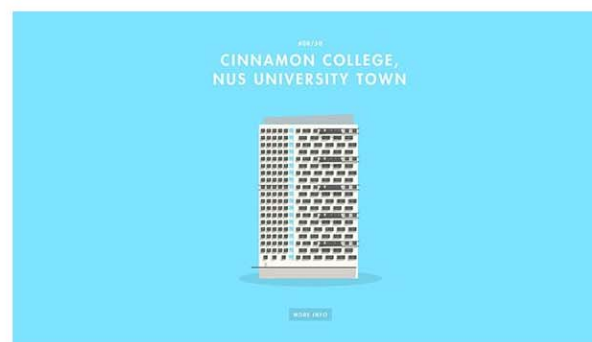


PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

"I feel that there are a lot of issues in Singapore that need discussing but which are often swept under the carpet.

"Meritocracy is one issue, and that's covered in the Cinnamon College building. Our system of meritocracy ensures that every one of us sit for the same national examinations, but that does not equate to equal opportunities for all.

"Because our performance in examinations are not only determined by our "intelligence" or how hard working we are (as the government likes to think), but also the economic, social and cultural capital we possess. Students from affluent families can afford to have private tuition lessons, and have parents who are alumni of prestigious schools who can use that connection to gain an entry into those primary/secondary schools.

"There is a reason why the demographics of university, polytechnic and ITE students, and of elite schools vs neighbourhood schools, are so different. Mr Chan Poh Meng, principal of Raffles Institution, recently said in a speech that the school has become a middle-class school, and explained how meritocracy has become less effective today than it used to.

"Our growing income gap is another issue. While we enjoyed a rapid increase in our per capita GDP since our independence, a sizeable portion of the rewards are reaped by the wealthiest in our nation.

"What sparked my decision to start Building Singapore was the many state-driven SG50 celebrations. We're constantly bombarded by these celebrations and events, and often they come across as very self-congratulatory. We see the common themes – fishing village to metropolis, third world to first, thanking our pioneers – but these are very superficial, even historically fishy (pun intended) narratives.

"So we can, and should, celebrate what we've achieved thus far but also be aware of our flaws and the alternative narratives that drives our histories. We've progressed at a crazy pace, but we've also left many people behind. We say we thank our pioneers, but in the same breath we demolish the homes and neighbourhoods they grew up in – for new estates, malls, and expressways. We celebrate our multiculturalism, but often fail to examine the boxed, "CMIO" nature of our dialogues around racial issues. Our education system is the best in the region, but our system of meritocracy also promotes unequal opportunities.

"Building Singapore aims to explore these issues, a building at a time."

On your [website](#), you've written this: "A designer and an accountant walk into a bar. Only one man walks out." What do you mean by that?



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

"I'm studying accountancy in NUS, but my real interest lies in graphic design. This joke/statement is a reference to this weird dual identity that I'm struggling with right now. While many might think of a designer and an accountant as totally different individuals, it so happens that I am both at once (at least for now)."

What motivates you to design?

"I like beautifully-designed things. And beauty in design doesn't only mean having a pretty facade, it means making something more meaningful at the same time. A well designed website, or product, or illustration, communicates a message better than a mediocre one.

So, talking about important social issues via pretty illustrations, I feel, makes these issues more approachable and interesting, and that's what I hope to do with Building Singapore."

How do you balance your design work and your studies?



I'm Yu Siang, a graphic designer based in Singapore. I love making pretty and meaningful stuff, such as [illustrations](#), [logos](#) and [magazines](#), and I'm particularly interested in [UX design](#).

Oh, I'm also studying accountancy in university. And learning coding as you're reading this.

You can find more of my designs on my [design blog](#). I also write [short stories](#) and publish my own [websites](#). This website is coded by me.



PHOTO: TEO YU SIANG

"It's a really tough balance! I only have 24 hours a day, so I balance both accountancy and design by sacrificing the hours at night. I usually do my studies and work in the day, and spend the night working on my own design projects. If I'm not binge-watching some TV series, that is."

When designing, which is more important to you, the subject / concept, or the way it is executed?

"I think both are equally important. In a way, one cannot exist properly without another. A strong concept provides a good foundation from which to build your project, but proper execution makes sure that the project is communicated well and understood by others in the first place. Put it this way: without good execution, you're shouting in a vacuum, and without good concept, you're screaming gibberish."

What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given with regards to design?

"'Why are you studying accountancy?' turns out to be one of the best life advice I've received, and that relates to my pursuit of design as a career. Because it tells me that people like my design enough to want to see it developed into a career."

Are you considering pursuing design full time?

"Yup, I am! For now my plan is to finish my final year of studies in university and then pursue design full time."