



DESIGN: SALLY LAM PHOTOS: KOH KIM CHAY, ARIFFIN JAMAR

Ode to the heartland

The ubiquitous HDB flat has become muse to photographers like Mr Koh Kim Chay, 60, who capture the beauty of estates such as this one in Kim Pong Road (left), demolished in 2002. [Natasha Ann Zachariah](#) reports. **D6&7**

Think outside the block

Singapore's public housing is a popular photography theme, with at least three projects exploring its facets



Natasha Ann Zachariah

Housing Board (HDB) flats, the ubiquitous and quintessential icon of Singapore's heartland, might seem like mere concrete blocks of stacked apartments.

But these buildings, which most Singaporeans live in, have become the muse of photographers here. There are at least three projects that explore different facets and angles of the HDB flat and suburban neighbourhoods.

Hobbyist photographer Koh Kim Chay, 60, has a collection of black-and-white photos of public housing estates that no longer exist today. He spent almost three decades photographing them and now plans to publish them in a book.

Then there is former urban planner Siyuan Ma, 28, who has made the HDB corridor the focus of his photo series. His work was highlighted on ArchDaily, a well-known architecture website.

Last month, a 680-page photography book, *HDB: Homes Of Singapore*, which showcases the everyday lives of Singaporeans in their HDB flats, went on sale. The project by architect Tomohisa Miyasuchi, art educator Tamae Waseda and fine art printer Eitaro Ogawa offers a look at the lives of HDB residents.

Over three years, they photographed 118 households to show how each owner put his own spin on the interiors.

Two thousand copies were published and each book costs \$50. They are sold at Kinokuniya bookstores and online at Gatehouse Publishing's website (www.gatehousepublishing.com).

Mr Miyasuchi, 40, a senior lecturer at the National University of Singapore, says he has received notes from readers who say the images resonated with them.

"Many were inspired by the interiors, but it also made them think about the homes they grew up in. They see everyday items in other people's homes that they have. That familiar feeling is comforting to them."

"Unlike Singapore's skyscrapers, the architecture of HDB flats is more subtle and it takes a deeper appreciation to understand. Also, looking at the way people live in HDB flats really does capture your imagination."

The visual love affair with HDB flats has gained traction in recent years.

Amateur photographers flood photo-sharing platform Instagram with their own take on HDB architecture and heartland life.

They also turn up in droves to capture the last pictures of buildings that will be torn down. For example, many photographed Rochor Centre after it was reported that the cluster of rainbow-coloured HDB blocks would be demolished.

Veteran architectural and landscape photographer Darren Soh, 41, says it is great that more people want to photograph this part of Singapore. Visually, he says, not all HDB flats are plain objects. Many have "strong geometry and a scale that is off the charts".

Mr Soh himself has photographed thousands of images of a few hundred blocks. He first shot an HDB flat in 2006 - his old place in Block 92 Commonwealth Close. He says: "It's dismissive to say this is a photography fad. If you look at the big picture, it's a way to document HDB flats as they might not be there in future. They're part and parcel of what is uniquely Singapore."

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MR DARREN SOH, a veteran architectural and landscape photographer, on the popularity of photographing HDB flats



The diversity along HDB corridors

When it comes to photographing Housing Board flats, cool interiors, heartland life or interesting architecture are usually first picks for shutterbugs looking for exciting shots.

Utilitarian corridors, on the other hand, not so much. But one photographer has made these passageways the subject of a photo series called *Corridors Of Diversity*.

The photos follow a similar composition: A parapet of the corridor runs down the middle of the picture, splitting it into half.

In one half, there is a view of how HDB dwellers on that floor use their corridor - there are personal items such as plants or bicycles - while the other half provides the bigger picture of Singapore, such as public infrastructure and greenery.

Former urban planner Siyuan Ma, 28, spent about five months photographing corridors from Bukit Puri to Marine Parade, for the project that he feels "celebrates the diverse and colourful images of Singapore that shape its collective identity".

The bachelor is currently pursuing a master's degree in Smart Cities and Urban Analytics at University College London.

The self-taught photographer, who started shooting in 2009, says: "Singapore is recognised internationally for its success in both urban planning and public housing development. However, there aren't many photographic portfolios that address both subject matters together."

"I envisioned my project to showcase both macro and micro elements that characterise the urban landscape of Singapore."

He took about 500 pictures for his project and picked a handful for the series.

Corridors Of Diversity recently won a silver award in the Architecture Buildings category at the Tokyo International Photo Awards, a photography competition for professionals and amateurs. It was also featured on ArchDaily, a well-known architecture website, last month.

The project started by accident. Last year, while waiting to meet a friend, he went to a high floor of Block 333 Kreta Ayer Road to get a good view of The Pinnacle@



Duxton, a cluster of 50-storey HDB flats in Tanjong Pagar that is often photographed for its soaring towers and sky bridges.

Instead, he was drawn to the sights in the corridor. With the Central Business District (CBD) skyline as the backdrop, he could also make out shophouses - a reminder of the area's older architecture - and the construction work on the upcoming Thomson Line.

That was when he took the first shot for the corridor project with the composition that would come to define the series.

Research and chance decide the selection of locations. He picked well-known HDB blocks that have a distinctive character as well as historical and cultural significance. Examples include Bras Basah Complex and Hong Lim Complex, both of which are mixed-use developments and are centrally located.

He also wanted to show Singapore's urban planning efforts in the photos. So, besides the corridors, he would work into the picture's composition the nearby buildings, green spaces and urban forms.

His favourite corridor is one in Block 110 Bukit Puri Road that stretches across connecting blocks. From a high floor of the block, he got "a breathtaking view of the city from a distance" that includes the

Port of Singapore, skyscrapers from the CBD, the Church of St Teresa and various green spaces.

He sometimes makes multiple visits to one corridor to see if he can capture other elements.

For example, when he returned to Selegie House near National Day last year for a second time, the blocks were lined with Singapore flags on each level. He took a photo that featured the uniform lines and flags and named it *#Diversity In Unity*.

For now, he is submitting the series to photo festivals to be featured. He is also talking to book publishers to release a photo book with 70 images that he has chosen.

He may expand the project when he returns to Singapore later this year. There are many locations, such as flats in the western and northern parts of the island, that he has not visited.

While working on the project, he noticed that HDB dwellers had many things in common with one another, such as a love of cycling and plants.

Mr Ma, an only child who grew up in a condominium in the east, says: "I learnt to be an observant passer-by. Walking by many corridors, I got a glimpse of the lives of so many different households."

"This journey itself has been an eye-opening experience for me."



The *Corridors Of Diversity* project by Mr Siyuan Ma (above) includes those in public housing complexes such as Selegie House (far left) as well as buildings in Bukit Puri (top). PHOTOS: SIYUAN MA

Singapore's vanishing flats

With lush greenery cascading from its terraced facade, the Parkroyal on Pickering hotel along Upper Pickering Street is a building that is hard to miss.

But long before it became a landmark, older Singaporeans knew it as the place where the early high-rise flats were built by the Singapore Improvement Trust in the 1950s.

There were five blocks, nine storeys high, which were among the highest public housing blocks in Singapore. They were torn down by 2005, but not before hobbyist photographer Koh Kim Chay, 60, took some pictures of them.

Since he started dabbling in photography in the 1980s, the retired engineer has an interest in the changing face of Singapore.

As such, he photographs some of the first public housing estates and precincts, such as the Upper Pickering Street flats and Princess Estate in Queenstown. He also has pictures of other defunct buildings such as the Market Street Carpark and the red-brick National Library Building in Stamford Road.

To date, Mr Koh has built up a collection of about 30,000 photographs of Singapore.

Now, he hopes to publish a black-and-white photo book of 27 old estates, titled *Singapore's Vanishing Public Housing Estates*.

He has started a crowd-funding campaign on Indiegogo last month to raise US\$10,000 (\$14,020) to cover the design and printing cost of 500 copies.

Working with him is fellow photographer and former teacher Eugene Ong, 39, who helped with the selection of the pictures and did research on these places. He also wrote short paragraphs about each

estate and the introduction to Mr Koh's body of work.

Mr Koh hopes the book can help Singaporeans remember old places that had to make way for new buildings. "The landscape in Singapore is never permanent," he says. "Through the photographs, you can compare and see how it has changed."

Along with the photographs in the book, there are postcards, vintage maps, eviction notices and other memorabilia of these estates, all from Mr Koh's collection.

Featured places include the Princess Elizabeth Park, off Hillview Avenue, which was built in 1951, and the 14-storey Forfar House in Strathmore Avenue that was built in 1956.

Mr Koh, who lives in an executive Housing Board flat in Choa Chu Kang, started his documentation project by chance.

In the 1980s, when he was an avid philatelist, he visited a stamp fair where he came across a dealer selling real photo postcards. Many of the scenes were of Singapore's colonial buildings from the 1920s to 1940s, long since demolished, but there was no photograph of buildings from after that period.

That gave him the idea to start a series on current buildings that might be pulled down soon so people can remember them for posterity.

His photography skills are mostly self-taught. His only formal training is a photography course at the Saffra Photographic Club in 1999.

An active urban explorer, he went around different neighbourhoods taking pictures, often making special trips to places that faced demolition after he read about their fates in newspaper reports.

He started out shooting on



colour film, but stopped after noticing that the prints deteriorated in Singapore's hot and humid weather.

Looking at the quality of the old monochrome photo postcards that he had collected, Mr Koh decided to switch to shooting in black and white in 2000.

He processes the photos himself in a dark room at Saffra's Mount Faber premises. He then meticulously catalogues the prints with details such as the date he shot it, before placing them in a photo album. He says: "There's an archival quality to it if the photos are kept well. Photos that I took years ago are still beautiful."

So far, Mr Koh, who is married with a son aged 27, and Mr Ong have raised about 40 per cent of the targeted sum on Indiegogo. If crowd-funding does not work, they may fund the project themselves.

Mr Ong says: "There are lots to learn from the photos and they are a part of Singapore's history that many have never seen before as the buildings are no longer here. We have to tell those stories."

This public housing block at Upper Pickering Street (above) has been torn down, but was captured on film by hobbyist photographer Koh Kim Chay (right, in red, here with fellow photographer Eugene Ong). PHOTOS: KOH KIM CHAY, SEAH KHANG PENG

Go to go.me/st/svphe for the crowd-funding campaign.

