

# TO GATHER, TOGETHER

**The Singapore Pavilion goes mainly digital at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale, presenting nuanced and delicate works alongside constructed projects**



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How will people live together?

The question, normally mulled over by architects and urban planners, is now something with which the whole world is grappling because of the coronavirus pandemic.

It is also the main theme of the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale from May 22 to Nov 21 this year, curated by Lebanese educator and architect Hashim Sarkis.

The Singapore Pavilion this year combines both a physical space in Venice as well as a digital platform. It will train the spotlight on pressing spatial and design questions raised by the pandemic, climate change and global socio-political upheaval.

The architecture biennale,

which started in 1980 and is recognised globally as the pre-eminent architectural forum, will host 110 participants from 46 countries, including Singapore.

This is the city-state's seventh exhibition since first taking part in the Biennale Architettura in Venice in 2004.

Last year, the Italian organisers of the biennale postponed two of its signature exhibitions: this year's architecture biennale, which was originally planned for May last year; and the art biennale, which will be held in April next year instead of next month.

Venice also organises theatre, dance, music and film biennales.

The Singapore Pavilion, titled "to gather: The Architecture of Relationships", showcases 16 speculative and built works on-site in a physical exhibition space in Venice. Due to the pandemic, digital platforms will be used to present the pavilion to an international audience.

Besides architectural renderings of projects, there are also constructed projects, such as Woha Architects' Kampung Admiralty comprising Housing Board flats for the elderly, completed in 2017; and DP Architects' Our Tampines Hub, Singapore's first community and lifestyle hub (2017).

It is curated by the National University of Singapore (NUS), and co-commissioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and DesignSingapore Council. The pavilion is expected to be restaged in Singapore next year.

It highlights familiar Singaporean spaces such as hawker centres, community hubs, void decks and sky gardens that show how good design in built environments

helps to address challenges in making communities safer, more sustainable and resilient as the country emerges from the pandemic.

Professor Ho Puay-peng, lead curator of the Singapore Pavilion and head of the Department of Architecture at NUS, says that while architects have always played a significant role in designing spaces in Singapore, this contribution cannot continue without "relearning what it means to live together", especially after the pandemic.

"Returning to the status quo is inexcusable," he tells *The Straits Times*.

Prof Ho heads a curatorial team of experts for the Singapore Pavilion, including NUS Department of Architecture's Assistant Professor

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**PROFESSOR HO PUAY-PENG**, lead curator of the Singapore Pavilion at the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. The exhibition's main theme aims to examine how people can live together



An artist's impression of the theme for this year's Singapore Pavilion, titled "to gather: The Architecture of Relationships", which explores how Singapore's people share space with one another and with nature. PHOTO: OW JUN JIE

Simone Shu-Yeng Chung and Associate Professor Thomas Kong; Professor of Practice Tomohisa Miyauchi from IE School of Architecture and Design in Spain; and American urbanist, curator and writer Sarah Ichioka.

"We selected works based on their relevance to local context, innovation in concept and solutions, and inclusivity," Prof Ho says. "Perhaps this global public health crisis can motivate architects to expand their roles in society in an innovative way, and take this opportunity to actively shape a new culture and a new way forward."

NUS' Dr Chung says the idea for the Singapore presentation grew from a desire to gather stories on the ground, which contributed to the Singapore theme of "to gather".

She says the exhibition was envisioned as a platform for the "convivial gathering of ideas and conversations" raised by the projects.

"In addition to built works, we wanted to include speculative projects that pushed the limits of our architectural imagination," adds Dr Chung, who has been involved in the Singapore presentation since November 2019.

Prof Ho and the team worked together to formulate the pavilion's concept, curatorial direction and design.

Dr Chung says: "The Venice Biennale's thematic call for the forging of 'new spatial contracts' is a timely one."

"Central to what underpins the Singapore team's curatorial intention is the notion of 'sympoiesis' – we all coexist as part of a complex social and ecological assemblage, mutually supporting and influencing one another."

For Ms Ichioka, who has worked

on two previous iterations of the Venice Biennale Architettura – first in 2006 with exhibition director Ricky Burdett and then as chair of the commissioning panel for the British Pavilion in 2010 – the postponement of the biennale from last year to this year allowed the curatorial team to reflect on how the pandemic has affected the pavilion's themes, and to ensure local content is accessible to foreign audiences.

"As in its other recent editions, the Singapore Pavilion has taken an inclusive approach, allowing us to share with international audiences nuanced and imaginative projects," she says.

"These include Studio Lapis' research into the history of Haw Par Villa, and Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative's Both Sides, Now project, which sensitively examines end-of-life issues, while also showcasing larger and better-known projects by the likes of Woha and DP Architects."

Ms Ichioka says that while Singapore is facing the threats of climate change, an ageing population and a globally dependent economy, it also has to find ways to help its ethnically and socio-economically diverse population to coexist.

"Architecture is never a panacea," she says. "But in a densely built-up place like Singapore – where people literally live on top of, and travel shoulder to shoulder with, one another – spatial design plays an important part in supporting inclusive connections and dignified interactions."

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• For more information on the Singapore Pavilion, go to [to-gather.sg](http://to-gather.sg)



## 6 Singapore works at the Venice Architecture Biennale



### The art of living and leaving well

**BOTH SIDES, NOW**  
By Drama Box, ArtsWok Collaborative and Forest & Whale

Both Sides, Now is a community engagement project by ArtsWok Collaborative, an arts-based community development company. The project, which has been running since 2013, combines arts performances and

installations – such as round tables used at Chinese funerals in Housing Board void decks – to start conversations about how to “live well and leave well”.

Ms Ngiam Su-Lin, 47, co-founder and executive director of ArtsWok Collaborative, which pilots and produces creative community-based projects, says: “The framing of this work has

become even more heightened during this pandemic, as loss, illness and death in significant numbers are happening around us.”

Ms Ngiam, who is also a trained theatre practitioner and creative producer, adds: “We are even more acutely aware of our vulnerability and mortality, but also how dependent we are on one

another for social connection, for support, for touch and the exchange of energies.”

The project is co-presented with Singapore-based philanthropic organisations Lien Foundation and Ang Chin Moh Foundation. Forest & Whale designed the the installation for the biennale for ArtsWok Collaborative.



### Sites and smells

**AN ODE TO SMELL**  
By Hyphen Architects,  
Mr Brian Khoo and Ms Mary Ann Ng

Part of an ongoing research project, An Ode To Smell is a collaboration between home-grown firm Hyphen Architects – led by Mr Chih Wen Chaw – and architectural designer Brian Khoo, as well as designer and researcher Mary Ann Ng. It examines how Singapore’s hot and humid weather amplifies smells.

The work looks at the role of smell in urban life and recalls olfactory memories through scents which a person can associate with a certain place.

The team has also found that Singapore’s unique scents are increasingly being obscured, with a majority of urbanites working in air-conditioned spaces – and, more recently, the donning of masks which block evocative environmental scents.

The team extracted scents using different methods.

For now, the project is speculative, but it will take the form of a “sniff and smell” format next year when the biennale is expected to be restaged in Singapore.

“It’s really interesting because you can never quite replicate the smell and atmosphere in totality,” says Ms Ng. “You can only come close to it.”





## Mending a 'broken garden'

SYNCRETICALLY, ECLECTICALLY  
'HAW PAR' HAVE WE COME?  
By Studio Lapis, Eugene Tan and  
Jerome Ng

A collaboration between conservation specialist Studio Lapis, Lego artist Eugene Tan and visual creative Jerome Ng, the installation recreates, in the form of a tabletop miniature landscape, three lost features of Haw Par Villa: the Villa, the Mermaid Pool and the Rockery.

Also called Tiger Balm Garden, Haw Par Villa was built in 1937 by businessman and philanthropist Aw Boon Haw and is famous for its immersive and fantastical dioramas.

Today, it is a worn vessel of old

and new fragments. "Through this installation, we address the question: 'How do we heal Haw Par Villa and mend a broken garden?'" says Ms Tan Kar Lin, 44, founding partner of Studio Lapis.

Recasting sites of loss as opportunities, the team adopted the approach of creating interpretative artworks to fill narrative gaps. The coherence of the garden is thus recovered and re-energised with new imagination.

Ms Tan says the installation is "a poignant reminder, in these troubled times, of Haw Par Villa as a site that celebrates cultural syncretism, craft, creativity, openness, philanthropy and generosity of spirit".



PHOTOS: BRIAN KHOO, DP ARCHITECTS, ERNEST GOH, FABIAN ONG, NUS-TSINGHUA DESIGN RESEARCH - SHARING CITIES, ZINKIE AW

## Taking nature to new heights

REWILDING THE SKY  
By salad dressing

Home-grown landscape design firm salad dressing introduces a speculative scenario that takes the idea of Singapore as a "City in Nature" a step further.

Rewilding The Sky imagines Singapore as an urban vertical landscape where every building is topped by a nature reserve.

In Singapore's new bio-digital era, as depicted in the work, urban areas merge with native landscapes, allowing city folk to live more closely with other living organisms and mull over bioethics - the study of ethical issues arising from advances in biology and medicine.

Ms Goh Yu Han, a director of the landscape design firm established in 2002, says the idea for Rewilding The Sky came to her team of architects, garden designers and professionals interested in ecology when they observed how the pandemic had



accelerated awareness of the environment.

"The lockdown actually caused the rare moment when we all 'gathered' together, to give space back to other living beings," says Ms Goh, 32.

"We realised it is not necessary to have physical space to gather. Meanwhile, the public space started to be occupied by other organisms. This forced us to be conscious of the current ecological condition together."



## Architects and HDB residents collaborate

OUR TAMPINES HUB  
By DP Architects

Since its inception in 1967, DP Architects has designed many of Singapore's landmark public projects, including Our Tampines Hub. The development, led by People's Association, is built on ideas about integration and sharing in architecture.

Singapore's first integrated community and lifestyle hub was launched in 2017 with an

arts theatre, the five-storey Tampines Regional Library and a plethora of sports facilities, including a 5,000-seat stadium and six rooftop swimming pools.

It was created for and with the residents of Tampines as a people-centric community destination.

Mr Seah Chee Huang, chief executive of DP Architects, says that through Our Tampines Hub, the firm hopes to share its belief in empowerment through synergistic architecture that has been shaped by community and stakeholder participation.

"(This) moulds the everyday lives of Tampines residents of all ages and interests, to enrich how they relate, connect and bond with one another," he says.

## AR-powered 'sharing city'

ARCHITECTURE OF SHARING CULTURE  
By NUS-Tsinghua Design Research -  
Sharing Cities

National University of Singapore's (NUS) Dr Zhang Ye and the Singapore University of Technology and Design's Dr Jeffrey Chan helm the NUS-Tsinghua Design Research Initiative - Sharing Cities augmented reality (AR) project.

Visitors to the to-gather.sg website can immerse themselves in hypothetical urban scenarios that envision a sharing culture.

Dr Zhang, 38, and Dr Chan, 46, observed several practices in Singapore that show the beginning of such a culture, such as shared

community fridges in Tampines; and a children's library nook at a lift landing on the 39th floor of an HDB block in Ghim Moh, which was set up by a resident.

"We are seeing more community-building projects that begin to incorporate sharing activities as essential design components," says Dr Zhang.

The project, he says, expresses a sharing culture through an AR environment, characterised by inclusiveness and togetherness in cities. "In our AR project, people who were once strangers become new neighbours when they interact and cooperate to sustain this virtual 'sharing city'," he adds.

The initiative is a collaborative design research project with DP Architects and is sponsored by the Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation (Hong Kong).