

## Pioneer architect Tay Kheng Soon's latest book calls for urgent action to repair the harm inflicted on nature

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In his latest book on architecture, Professor Tay Kheng Soon paraphrases geographer Rodolphe De Koninck, who refers to the study of geography as "living in the wisdom of the inhabited earth".

That phrase sums up much of what the 81-year-old pioneering architect sets out to address in *Activist Architecture: Thoughts On Asian Architectural Education*, published by Epigram Books late last year.

He calls for urgent action to right the wrongs of more than 200 years of deforestation, rampant urban development and pollution.

One of Singapore's top thinkers, who is known for iconic 1970s modernist landmarks such as People's Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex, he reimagines architecture and architectural studies with a distinctly Asian approach.

The book hits the shelves hot on the heels of a hefty 731-page tome titled *Big Thinking On A Small Island: The Collected Writings And Ruminations Of Tay Kheng Soon*, released last year by Equilibrium Consulting for the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture, where he is currently an associate professor.

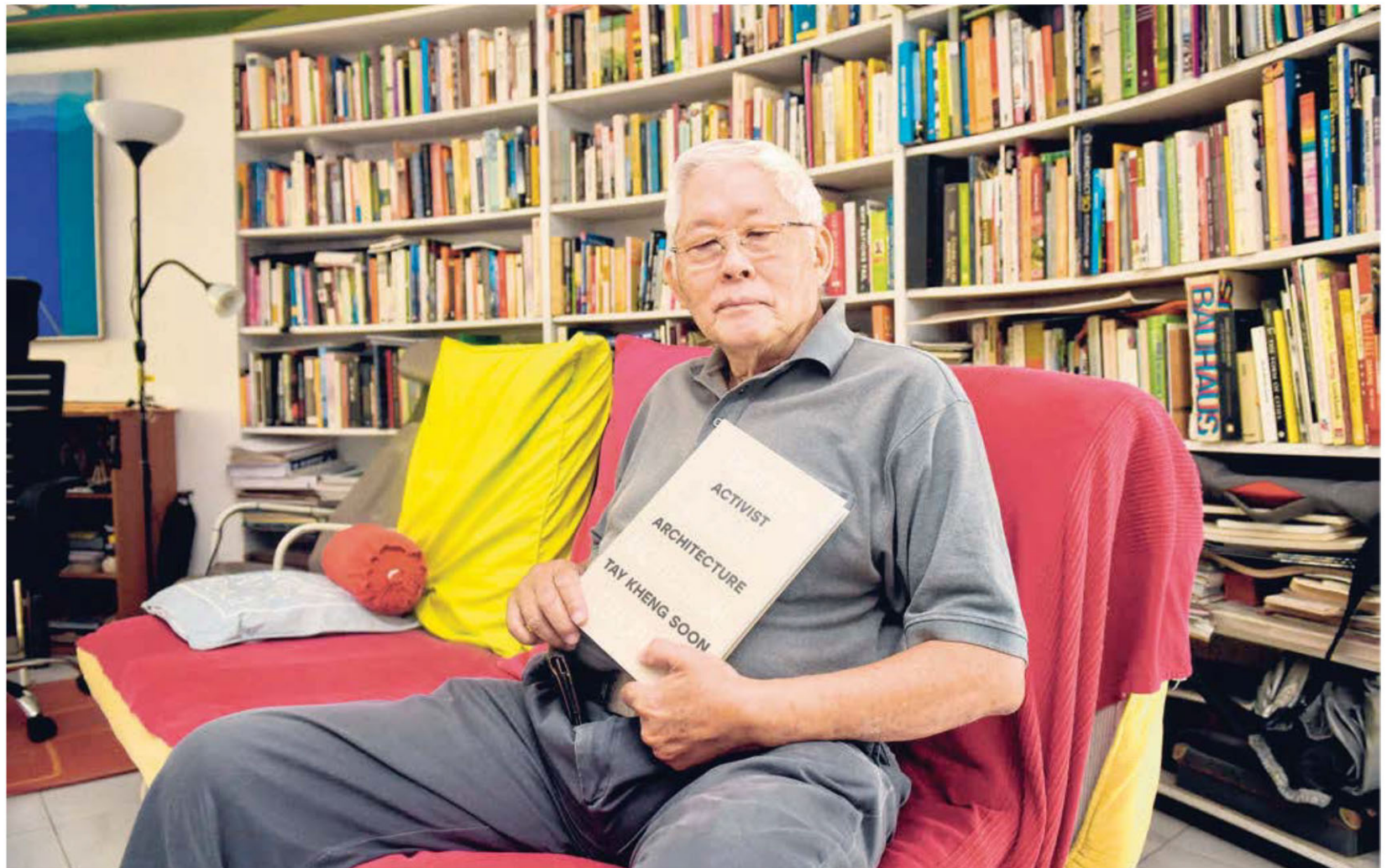
In *Activist Architecture*, Tay says climate change is a symptom of what ails the planet as a result of the harmful actions of mankind.

"We have to repair nature, and in order to repair nature, we have to also repair ourselves," he tells *The Straits Times* from the living room of his five-room Housing Board flat in Bukit Batok.

"It is now a societal problem, individual problem, social problem, economic problem, political problem – the whole gamut. And thus design for me is looking at all these problems and coming up with a comprehensive approach. It is not an artistic enterprise," says Tay, who has two sons in their 50s.

The former chairman of the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group in the 1970s, Tay was also president of the Singapore Institute of Architects and was awarded its gold medal in 2010.

He adds that the environment, the buildings and the cities that are built must be appealing, "must look good, must feel good", but more than that, they must be in harmony with nature.



Professor Tay Kheng Soon with his new book *Activist Architecture*, in which he highlights how architects and urban planners have to rethink social interactions in the wake of the pandemic.  
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# Rethinking architecture for a new normal

In the book, he highlights that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced architects and urban planners to rethink social interactions.

"Designers today have to think about the implications of social distancing in terms of environmental design," he says.

"We need a certain density and compactness when we design homes, but we also have to do that in a way that allows for social con-

nectedness while maintaining safe distancing."

He says Singapore has to nurture an ecosystem of high-tech innovations, instead of being a mass manufacturing node, to do well in a post-pandemic reality of increased uncertainties and competition from developing economies hungry for growth.

"We can do this by reimagining our Institutes of Technical Educa-

tion, polytechnics and university campuses as Enterprise Campuses," he says. He also illustrates this idea in a detailed video on his YouTube channel.

"Students come to class and get to mingle with start-ups that are allowed to operate on our campuses through reduced rentals. This network of Enterprise Campuses in turn helps nurture an ecosystem of Singapore as an Enterprise City,

where we fuel growth with ideas."

As an example, he says Singapore needs to look no further than his favourite mode of transport – his motorbike.

His Swiss Quadro Qooder is a four-wheeler which was designed and engineered in Switzerland, but manufactured in Taiwan.

"That is what Singapore must do," Tay adds. "We have to focus on creating cutting-edge designs

and outsource the manufacturing to places that can produce them better, cheaper and faster.

"We have to become a brain centre, not a mass production centre."

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• *Activist Architecture: Thoughts On Asian Architectural Education* (\$54.90) is available in bookstores and online at [epigrambookshop.sg](http://epigrambookshop.sg).