

Another Initial Impetus #0

Session 0: Lim Chong Keat

17 November 2019
Ngee Ann Kongsi Auditorium
National Gallery Singapore



Datuk Seri Lim Chong Keat is a polymath and pioneering architect who played a pivotal role in the shaping of the built environment of Singapore and in the development of modern art in the city's post-war years. The following excerpts are derived from a keynote lecture delivered in conjunction with the exhibition "Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)." They capture some of Lim's recollections of designing architectural landmarks like the Singapore Conference Hall, his interactions with artists of the Alpha Gallery, and his friendship with the Futurist Buckminster Fuller.

ON HAVING A SENSE OF BEAUTY

1 I have to admit that I came from a privileged background because in the house there were books and paintings and so

on, and from the early days, my father was a fan of Yong Mun Sen. We were also exposed in school to the work of Abdullah Ariff, Yong Mun Sen—pioneers of Malaysian art. But it was seeing a picture of Fallingwater by Frank Lloyd Wright in one of my sister’s books or magazines strewn around that made me decide to go into architecture—I’m not sure if I wanted to be an architect, but I was interested in architecture and design.



A drawing of Fallingwater

The actuality of Fallingwater was quite a surprise to me, when I visited and stayed there as a guest of Edgar Kaufmann Jr. Actually, you’ll never see this view, unless you want to risk your life by climbing down to the ravine. A lot of people are misled by illustrations of buildings—from photos, one might think of Fallingwater as having sharp corners, for example. Instead, those cantilevers, all the edges are rounded. And they are not black and white, they are actually cream-coloured; and, of course, the stone is honey-coloured—the sense of the organic architecture of Wright was quite different from all illustrations.

So I always tell people, “Go to the original, the reality—not images from photographs and so on.” Although once you know the code, you can of course interpret the pictures.



Lim Chong Keat's home at Ngee Ann Building in Singapore, c. 1960

When I came back to Singapore, I was teaching at the school of architecture. In fact, we set up the school in the Singapore Polytechnic—it was called the School of Building and Architecture¹. I lived in Ngee Ann Building, which was a modernist building. Looking at photos of my home then, you can see the eclectic nature of what I was imbibing; you can recognise almost everything there.

The chair, the Egg Chair of Arne Jacobsen. The kites from Terengganu. The painting by Quek Wee Chew. The one on the right is by Tay Chee Toh, very much after Cheong Soo Pieng's work. The sitar in the corner, which I attempted to play but never could. I eventually gave it to the University's Department of Music—I don't know whether they still have it. On the carpet was a colour patch from Tai Ping Carpets, then a pioneer in making local carpets, which we later commissioned for the Singapore Conference Hall and the UOB building.

...

Are you all familiar with the phrase "Art is essentially useless... like Life itself"? This is quoted from George Santayana's tremendous book on his pragmatic philosophy, called *The Sense of Beauty*, which I was exposed to when I was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I did not meet him

personally, but I derived a lot from his thinking, to the extent that I embodied quite a bit of it in my thesis, which drew a lot of flak from a very pompous professor of history. He said, "You don't seem to have ideas of your own—only quoting others." I said, "For good reason, because he can speak it so well, much better than I can, and I empathise with him." Now, this guy prided himself on being an aesthetic philosopher, and so he of course took umbrage at my espousing of Santayana, who's a pragmatist. And the chap—whose name I should not mention, which I will however in my memoirs—declared himself to be a logical positivist.

Now, do you know what that means? These are the people who say that the thing is inherently beautiful, whereas a pragmatist feels that you have to develop your value-sense—of art, or culture or music or language or whatever. So, you choose the line—if you're a logical positivist maybe you don't want to stay anymore in this lecture.

But everyone has to discover it. Now, life can be valueless too, if you don't discover the values in life. And funny enough, this is actually a very Buddhist thing. If you just take truth—taught, swallowed—without realising it for yourself, you're really not there. So, how many of you have the sense of beauty? Sense of art? Sense of design?

ON THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL & ENDOGENOUS ARCHITECTURE

Some background to the Hall. We studied it by model, so the building is very well articulated. Even when I look back, I'm surprised in a sense by how complete and mature the building was, as my first major project. It of course was the winning design in a competition, so some credit goes to the assessors, who obviously had good taste!

But it is of historical importance for you to look at the entries by the other architects, to see how different the building was from the other entries. They were very eclectic and the School of Architecture should analyse that—we were not part of the trend at that time.

I should mention the model maker here—the late Sannie Abdul, who was later in the Design Centre. He did the model. You see, this is before the days of computer graphics. I still think that models are better ways of studying what you have in mind.



Singapore Conference Hall, c. 1970. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

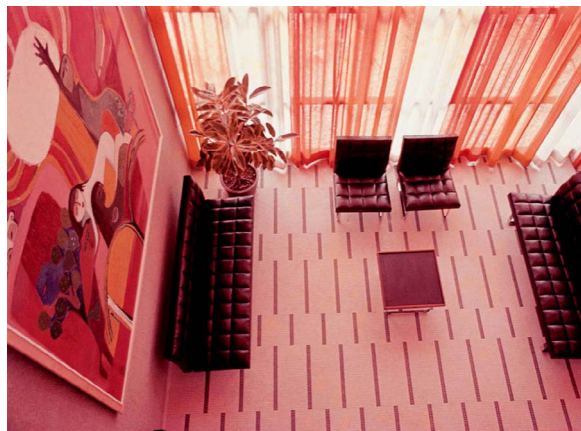


This is an early model, which we recreated because the M+ in Hong Kong wanted a reproduction of what it was. So, we showed that, with the original water features, and the director of the Public Works Department—can't remember his name now—said "Remove! Waste of water!" He was so fussy. He wanted us to reduce the cantilevered balcony—shorten it to save money—typical stupid engineer. He went to the extent of saying the nosing in our staircase should be chopped off: "Your staircase should not have this nosing. It should be like that." But he left for an academic post and we put back all those things, except the water.

You will notice a piece of public sculpture, which was never finished. So, when I made the model, I recreated the concept for this sculpture—a public sculpture on the floor, which can be changed in its configuration. It's of course a modulation on the pyramid. This gives you an idea of the background in visual design that I had in MIT, under the great teacher called György Kepes, who was really part of the Bauhaus, because he was an associate of László Moholy-Nagy. So, the discipline of form was what we imbibed, and I believe the validity still today, against the decadence of the very wanton type of design going on.



The building incorporated what I was then interested in: motifs which are actually derived from mat designs in Terengganu and the use of native woods. We knew what all the woods were called: *merbau*, *jelutong*. This is the pattern, based on the Terengganu weave. The floor was also very simple—I don't know whether it's still there or if somebody has removed all that.



Children of the Sun in the lounge area of Singapore Conference Hall

In the lounge, there was a wall with a crack. It was fortunate that at that time I had met Khoo Sui Hoe. I suddenly felt from his early work that he could do a monumental painting—a big painting. So, historically speaking, this painting may be the first large work done by a local artist. It's called *Children of the Sun* and it belonged on this wall, because it had to hide a crack in the wall!

The background to that is rather interesting because actually I commissioned him to do two curved walls on the ground floor—meant to be murals of 24 feet. He had done the sketch but the Permanent Secretary—very nice guy—Low Choon Meng, was afraid to show this to the powers-that-be, because it was then the height of the anti-yellow culture phase of Lee Kuan Yew. They were afraid that if Lee Kuan Yew saw the sketch, which had bare breasts, they would all be decapitated!

So, he lost this drawing, although I'd gotten the donor for it—they would have been the first big murals in Singapore. It was never done, so as consolation I asked Sui Hoe to paint this big painting, which he had to stitch together canvases for to make it square.



(Left) Khoo Sui Hoe painting *Children of the Sun* at Lim Chong Keat's home at 291 Pasir Panjang; (Right) Interior of 291 Pasir Panjang

A major work. 291 Pasir Panjang is where Sui Hoe painted it, and where we held exhibitions informally before the days of galleries and so on. That's an actual in-situ shot of him painting. This was what Pasir Panjang was like. We had a lot of paintings...

...

I was also involved in the Malaysia-Singapore Airlines building, another historic building that has given way, which is actually an interesting story for urban renewal, because the planner then had designed the control as a two-storey podium. But we persuaded him to change it so that we would achieve a much better scale. The real first rooftop thing, and the first underground carpark.

You can see the sense of tropicality—the brise-soleil were very carefully calculated for sun angles and so on. And the façades were such that, facing East and West, the executive rooms could look out on the balconies. For the rest—of course staff should be focusing on their desks!



The now demolished MSA building (left) and Singapore Conference Hall (right)

We tried to introduce public art to the building in the form of a sculpture by Kim Lim, who was probably Singapore's most famous sculptor. She was married to the British artist William Turnbull; we were great friends. Her brother was actually my classmate in Penang and in London. So, I persuaded her, or rather her parents, to lend her piece called *Day*.



Day (1966) by Kim Lim on the podium roof of the MSA building

We brought it, heavy metal and all that, onto the roof, and placed it there for the board of the airlines to acquire it. But they could not make it out from scrap iron, so they didn't put forth the budget. So, MSA lost this piece of sculpture.

M+ also commissioned a model of the State Mosque of Negri Sembilan, which I designed. I think, in the history of Malaysian architecture, it is interesting, because you can say it's the first major mosque by persons who are not Muslim, but who actually had a lot of empathy.

And the inspiration—you see, an architect learns about buildings and appreciates them. I've been in the Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, I've been in many mosques—for example in Córdoba, and in the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. When we're looking at religious buildings, we are not thinking of having to design one, but you somehow learn about the spirit.

We knew all about the *kiblat*, how the *mihrab* works and so on. So we were well-equipped when the competition came. I must share the honours for this with my late partner, Chen Voon Fee; he worked with me all night on drawing this. An inspiration of a nine-sided building using conoidal shells that was very open. It's a building of, if I may say so, quite clear integrity—and very original. Again, when you do a building, you don't try to be derivative. In certain contexts, you may have to do a derivative building, but we were free and the luck of the draw was that we had judges who were open-minded.

If we had had a competition with a very conservative group, they might have rejected anything that did not have standard motifs; they might not know that the mosque wasn't specifically Islamic—it was Byzantine. We were trained in that background, so we knew that we could innovate, structurally.

...

In the process of writing my memoirs, I looked through old notes, and in 1995, I gave a lecture in Darmstadt, in the school of architecture there. It was titled, "Architecture in the Era of Decadence and Waste". It's worse now. The gimmickry, the work of criminals like Zaha Hadid. They're bad influences. I mean, frankly, not all her buildings are bad. The intention is

there but she doesn't know how to structure them. They're all fake in terms of structure—[gestures] like an artist, you know.

Le Corbusier was different. Le Corbusier was a real plastic artist, so when you see Ronchamp or you look at Chandigarh, he knew how to make buildings sculptural. But the lesser person just thinks it—like a diatribe, you know: "I have an idea. And then somebody else has got to implement it." That's fake. The architect must be complete, must know how to make the building to be complete. The idea of the Bauhaus as a design reform has gotten lost—it's become a style, like when they had that recent exhibition—it's just another style. A new Bauhaus is needed to stop the decadence and waste that's happening in design, in commerce, in architecture. And in planning—planning is, of course, completely kaput.

...

To make meaningful progress, you have to make it real for yourself, relative to your milieu, your locality. You firstly have "exogenous," from outside. The exotic—you only love something else. You know, if you have to live on beef steak all the time, you forget *nasi lemak*, that kind of thing. Then you have the native, which is "indigenous"—the folk architecture, which should be appreciated for its purity.

But in between the locality, the modernisation, you have to modernise according to your own terms. So, in architecture, I think what is significant of the architecture of your area, should be "endogenous." Similarly, your philosophy, your art and so on. So, that's what we mean: it is absorbing the world, and one cannot shut one's eyes and say, "I don't want to."

...

I would like to give a tribute to my late friend, Hou Ke-Hua, who was a lecturer in the Polytechnic. He was kind of scared to do the structure for the Conference Hall because there were some innovations for the cantilevers and so on. At that time, we brought in Povl Ahm of Ove Arup & Partners—one of the



Engineers Povl Ahm and Hou Ke-Hua in front of the Singapore Conference Hall

first projects they oversaw. But he did not really design it, so Hou Ke-Hua should take all the credit. I mention this because, unfortunately, he's passed away.

ON THE ALPHA GALLERY



(Left) Cover of brochure of first art exhibition at the Singapore Conference Hall, 15 to 25 Oct 1965; (Right) List of artists and works

This is the brochure for the first art exhibition at the Singapore Conference Hall, which was also an exhibition held for the Singapore Arts Society. The brochure was designed by Choy Weng Yang—you can see his affinity with the Bauhaus. He

put together this, and he became, of course, the mainstay for Alpha. In fact, he also designed the logo. Alpha was born after—that's another story. But the whole catalogue shows how comprehensive the group of artists represented there were.

I remember when I came back, I was a little supercilious about local artists. I thought they were all Sunday painters—which they were of course. I only became interested in the work of one or two, such as Quek Wee Chew, Tay Chee Toh and so on. But I remember an exhibition of the Singapore Art Society's held in the Amber Mansions, which have now been knocked down. Anybody remembers that one, where the keynote speaker was the late Lee Khoon Choy?

I did not think I heard him correctly, when in his opening statement he said, "Art is a matter of fashion." But later, before he died, I laid it out to him and said, "Actually I think you meant to say, 'Art is a matter of passion.'" But it is more than that: you have to have a sense of what it's all about.

...

Quek Wee Chew is I feel really one of Singapore's greatest still life painters—now in a very sad state. I really hope that a major



Still Life by Quek Wee Chew

exhibition is done for him, and I'll be glad to contribute some works. He is a major painter of still life, and it can be said that he has surpassed his teachers, which included Soo Pieng. The mastery is there—and look at his range of works.

...

Children of the Sun was displayed at a later exhibition at the Conference Hall. I walked a guy called Frank Sullivan, who was a kind of doyen of art in Kuala Lumpur, advisor to the government and all that.

When Frank Sullivan saw this, he scolded Sui Hoe. He said, "You naughty boy, this should be in the National Gallery in KL." So, he commanded him to send it to KL. Sui Hoe's memory is slightly different, but my version was that it was sent to KL, but Frank Sullivan never got the National Gallery to buy it. So, it was rolled up and neglected in a railway *godown* for two years before I heard about that and got it brought back to be restored by Sui Hoe.

It was then when Frank was kind of lording over the art scene and everybody was kowtowing to him. So, I said to a group of artists, "Why do you have to depend on these dictators? Make your own galleries." In this way, I was a stimulus in suggesting the beginning of Alpha. I'm not a sponsor for Alpha, but I did kind of push them from the back to form it.

...

I remember I had to avoid going to Alpha Gallery shows on the first day. Because people said, "You always buy the best one." So, I skipped it; I gave other people a chance. But in the end, I could still pick the one I felt was worthy. So, the buyer should have, in a sense, an intrinsic responsibility to be a discriminating patron—and I think some of the artists value this.

Some were probably a bit upset I never bought their works. Because I always felt I wanted to see the next show,

to have a choice. Some of them became very famous and reached great prices in auction houses. But I'm afraid I don't have respect for auction houses.

...

When art becomes commercial, it's a different thing. So, it is actually contrary to your sense of beauty.

When we were acquiring paintings—when I acquired paintings—we never thought of the price. We never thought of it as acquisitions, as investment. Because once you do that, it becomes a different thing altogether. So, you have to decide.

Of course, you'll have to be able to afford it. And the key thing was that when we started acquiring the paintings in the early days of Alpha, they were affordable. Today, they aren't affordable. I literally could buy paintings well within my monthly budget. But today, I can hardly buy a painting within my annual budget. So, you see how commercialisation is killing art.

ON BUCKMINSTER FULLER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

I first met Bucky in New Delhi, and the connection was very interesting. He told me he was there to give the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture. I knew him through his partner, Shoji Sadao. At that time, we actually had him in mind because I wanted him to do the dome, the geodesic dome in the KOMTAR project.

He said that he was going to Bali, having aborted his previous visit, which he was supposed to make with Rosa Covarrubias. I said, "Oh, I knew Rosa Covarrubias, and I was wondering why she never replied to me after I wrote to her." Bucky told me that she had died.

So, as he was going to Bali, I asked, "How long are you there for?" He said, "Oh just a day, you know, first day Bali, next day New York, that kind of thing." So, I said, "I better come with you." So that's how we went.

We then—because of my connection with Bucky—we had this great meeting and I did a tensegrity geodesic in bamboo there in the valley, and this was 1977. The great festival for his birthday. He last came to Singapore in 1982 where the School of Architecture students did this pipe geodesic at Starpoint.



Bamboo tensegrity dome for Buckminster Fuller's birthday in Bali, 1977.



Pipe geodesic dome at Starpoint, 1982.

This picture was given to me by Ashvinkumar Kantilal, one of the past presidents of Singapore Institute of Architects, who's apparently the young guy inside there. Bucky was here. In

fact, for the many Buckians here: you should celebrate him because he was present at many events: he had a very genuine connection with Southeast Asia—with Penang, Bali, Singapore. As a tribute, I made a dome for him. This is what it looked like at night, on Penang Hill. I made another 40-foot, six frequency geodesic dome for Bucky in my botanic garden in Penang. And as his virtual memorial, we were commissioned to do another dome in the Suan Luang Rama IX Park in Bangkok: a 90-foot geodesic in honour of Bucky, a geodesic dome which the US Chamber of Commerce donated for the King's Park in 1988.



Geodesic dome on Penang Hill

When Bucky came and stayed at the Starpoint house, which was a hexagonal house, with its own inspiration, we realised that it had the same size as his Dymaxion House. He was such a good friend, very polite. One of the things Bucky used to say was, "How efficient your building is, is how much it weighs." So, I mean the Starpoint house was typical concrete, too heavy. It wouldn't have pleased Bucky in terms of its structure.

But he loved the place, stayed there. In fact, one of my best memories was Bucky listening to music in that house. I asked him one morning, "What would you like to hear?" He

turned the tables and said, “You choose for me.” I chose to play for him Schubert’s Quintet in C Major.

The recording that I played for him was played by Pablo Casals, to which Bucky said, “I knew Casals.” So, the connections are very interesting—these are what we call “cosmic synchronicities.”



1. The architecture programme at was first established at Singapore Polytechnic in 1958. In 1969 it became part of the Department of Architecture at what was then the University of Singapore.

The work of pioneering architect **Datuk Seri Lim Chong Keat** has shaped Singapore's built environment. Lim sought to capture the totality of the environment in his designs, which drew on the Bauhaus movement and his careful study of Southeast Asia's built heritage. His monumental buildings, such as the Singapore Conference Hall and the Jurong Town Hall, inspired and blazed the trail for a whole new generation of architects. Together, Lim and his students, which include veteran architects Tan Cheng Siong (Golden Mile Complex) and Tay Kheng Soon (Pearl Bank Apartments), have collectively developed a distinct language of tropical modernism.

Beyond architecture, Lim staunchly supported the seminal Alpha Gallery. Established in 1971 on Alexandra Avenue as an artist cooperative, Alpha Gallery provided artists like Khoo Sui Hoe, Anthony Poon and Quek Wee Chew a vital platform for expression and growth. It championed experimental art, leaving a lasting impact on the visual arts ecology as well as the fields of design, anthropology and systems theory.



This zine is an edited and abridged version of a keynote lecture given by Lim Chong Keat on 17 November 2019 at National Gallery Singapore.

All images courtesy of Lim Chong Keat unless otherwise stated.

Edited by Gillian Daniel and Lucas Huang
Copyedited by Patricia Lee
Designed by gideon-jamie
Special thanks to Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

Issue 0 of the zine series *Another Initial Impetus*.
Published by National Gallery Singapore
©2020 National Gallery Singapore & contributors

* This version is exported in single pages for easy digital viewing. There is another version exported in double-page spreads with its pages reordered for booklet printing. You can find both at www.nationalgallery.sg

About the series

The “Another Initial Impetus” zine series explores the legacies of the seminal Alpha Gallery and its place in a formative period of Singapore’s cultural history. Sparked by a series of programmes organised in conjunction with the 2019 exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)* at National Gallery Singapore, each zine features individuals connected to the Alpha Gallery, as well as those who were inspired by or embody its spirit.



About the gallery

Yet another gallery: another four walls, another fifty pictures, another initial impetus. ALPHA is all this, too. And we believe, more as well.

—Arthur Yap, Introduction to the catalogue accompanying Alpha Gallery’s inaugural exhibition, October 1971.

The Alpha Gallery was as an artist-run cooperative gallery established in Singapore in 1971. It adopted a model of collective organisation where artists could share resources, enter and exit freely and actively contribute to burgeoning debates surrounding artistic production in an era of new modernity and rapid economic progress in then newly independent Malaysia and Singapore. The pioneering architect Lim Chong Keat was a catalyst and staunch supporter of the Alpha Gallery. Lim was inspired by the Bauhaus concept of a totality of knowledge, where the boundaries between disciplines like art, architecture, craft and design were fluid. Alongside becoming one of the most significant venues in Singapore for exhibiting contemporary art from the region, Alpha would thus also eventually become a place for the exchange of ideas between artists, as well as writers, cultural policymakers and architects, among others. Many members of these networks had also studied or practiced abroad, returning home during a critical juncture in Singapore’s history when it was considering urgent questions of postcolonial national identity. Against this backdrop, Alpha’s global outlook inspired a generation of artists and public intellectuals who went on to shape various fields of practice in Singapore.

