

BT Living

THE BUSINESS TIMES WEEKEND FEBRUARY 28 - MARCH 1 2015

DESIGN'S YOUNG TURKS

Next generation
of Singapore
architects

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TRAVEL

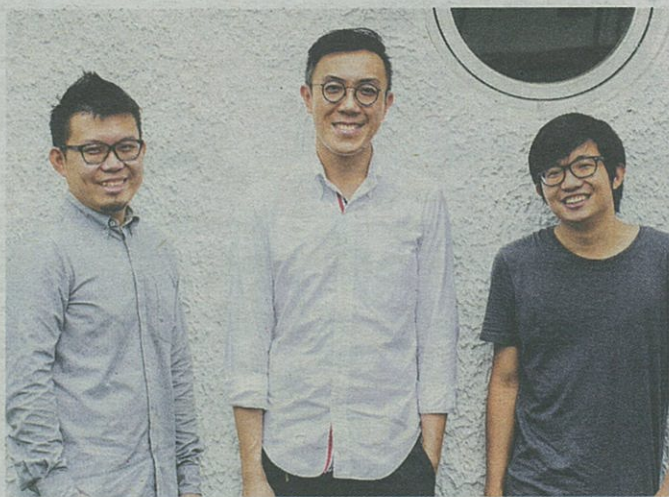
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**F&B NICHE**

WYNK Collaborative's (from far left) Dennis Huang, Leong Hon Kit and Si Jianxin have carved out a multidisciplinary niche in Singapore's notoriously fickle F&B industry designing spaces for the likes of Standing Sushi Bar (left) and Jewel Coffee (below). PHOTOS: WYNK COLLABORATIVE



THERE was a time, not so long ago, when Singapore's design scene – whether architectural, industrial, landscaping or product design – was dominated by a few big-hitters. In many cases, this reflected a desire to play it safe with known variables. In a sense, that dynamic is still at play today especially when it comes to big commercial or government projects.

The good news is that a fresh young generation of designers is arriving on the scene in increasingly greater numbers to challenge the status quo. Some have spent a number of years cutting their teeth on bold-faced-named offices both here and abroad before setting up their own shingles, while a surprising number began dipping their toes in the water before the ink on their graduation certificates had even dried.

Whether trained in the hallowed halls of Parsons and Saint Martins, or proudly homegrown, what the members of this new generation have in common is a desire to reinvent the world – one room, one building, one chair at a time.

While many of these Young Turks – seven of whom are profiled below – are intimately *au fait* with the designs of Norman Foster and Zaha Hadid, they retain a distinctly Singaporean edge. Their work is interesting and opinionated. More importantly, their affinity with local customs and climatic conditions invest their designs with a very natural, integrated bent that marries peculiar client demands with distinct pan-Asian notes.

These are never easy variables to balance, but in this year of Singapore's 50th Anniversary, their very existence – especially in a landscape that can sometimes err on the side of by-the-numbers caution – is an encouraging sign of what's to come.

WYNK Collaborative

www.wynkcollaborative.com

Established: 2011

Who: With an open approach to design, WYNK's founders Dennis Huang, 34, Leong Hon Kit, 33, and Si Jianxin, 32, have carved out a multidisciplinary niche in Singapore's notoriously fickle F&B industry, designing spaces for the likes of Standing Sushi Bar and Jewel Coffee. Trained as architects, their open-design approach allows them to extend their services beyond spatial design to include furniture, product design and even brand consultancy.

Design philosophy: "Our projects are always rooted in the idea of collaboration regardless of project type, and applying the combined knowledge of all the parties involved," says Mr Leong.

Design influences: Touchy-feely by nature, the designers are inspired by the people they meet, the materials they choose, and the colours and patterns around them.

Up next: WYNK's design of a modular pet house system will be showcased at SingaPlural 2015 in March. Besides working on the interior design of a 2,000-sq-ft cafe called Paddy Hills in South Buona Vista Road, WYNK is also designing the cafe's visual branding, advising on the menu and even curating the music selection.

On Singapore's design scene: Says Mr Leong, "We live in very exciting times in Singapore. We have an increasingly design-literate demographic that has become more discerning while being more accepting of different aesthetics. This creates an environment in which an unprecedented number of designers and works can thrive."

'WE LIVE IN VERY EXCITING TIMES IN SINGAPORE. WE HAVE AN INCREASINGLY DESIGN-LITERATE DEMOGRAPHIC.'

Leong Hon Kit of WYNK Collaborative

PRODUCE

Web: www.produce.com.sg

Established: 2013

Who: Loh Jian Hao, 33, Pan Yi Cheng, 35, Stanley Tan, 33, and Don Yap, 33, take the process of craftsmanship and production so seriously, they have their own precision prototyping machines. "When a design becomes sufficiently complex geometrically, it requires 1:1 scale prototyping and mock-ups to integrate detail design, fabrication and assembly," says Mr Pan, a trained architect. This, he explains, helps minimise redundancies and ad-hoc modifications on-site that often reduce design quality.



SINGAPORE DESIGN'S YOUNG TURKS

Next-generation designers are winning over clients with an opinionated, edgy design aesthetic.
By Arthur Sim and Daven Wu

PHOTOS: PRODUCE, MINDY TAN PHOTOGRAPHY



'IT IS IMPORTANT THAT SINGAPOREAN DESIGNERS INTEGRATE PRODUCTION AND INDUSTRIAL PROCESSES INTO THEIR CRAFT.'

Pan Yi Cheng (second from right) of PRODUCE. He is pictured with (from left) Don Yap, Stanley Tan and Loh Jian Hao

Design philosophy: The idea of the designer/architect-cum-craftsman/artisan is over. However, recent developments with respect to manpower (especially foreign manpower) in Singapore could change this.

Design influences: Elon Musk's SpaceX and Tesla Motors, and Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

Up next: PRODUCE was initially set up to create a range of small objects and furniture as a way of testing its prototyping capabilities. However, requests for larger commissions started coming in. For Wild Rocket at Upper Wilkie Road, the designers developed a new structural lattice system that it believes can be used for standalone pavilions.

On Singapore's design scene:

Singapore's design production relies heavily on outsourcing to other countries, Mr Pan laments. This, he says, leads to conservatism not only in the use of materials but also in design since customised, non-standard designs inevitably push up cost. "It is important that Singaporean de-

signers integrate production and industrial processes into their craft."

FDAT
www.fdat.co
Established: 2013

Who: After a decade at local architectural firm, WOHA, where they amassed valuable design experience in the hospitality industry, architects Donovan Soon, 38, and Francis Goh, 37, struck out on their own. Describing the work of designing hotels as being "quite specific and highly evolved", Mr Soon adds that hospitality design has become the firm's core focus. In the short time since it was established, FDAT has secured commissions with big players such as Parkroyal for UOL Group, and the Artyzen Hospitality Group.

Design philosophy: "We find integrated solutions to multiple issues. We also reference the culture and location of the project. This allows us to present solutions to complex problems using simple parts, very much like DNA," says Mr Soon. FDAT's design for their own offices in

Trengganu Street is a handy semaphore for their approach, one that also earned them a design award from the Singapore Institute of Architects in 2014. "We were inspired by the 'kelong' and other bakau/timber scaffolding-type structures in the local construction industry."

Design influences: WOHA founders, Wong Mun Summ and Richard Hassell. "Without them, we would not be here," says Mr Soon.

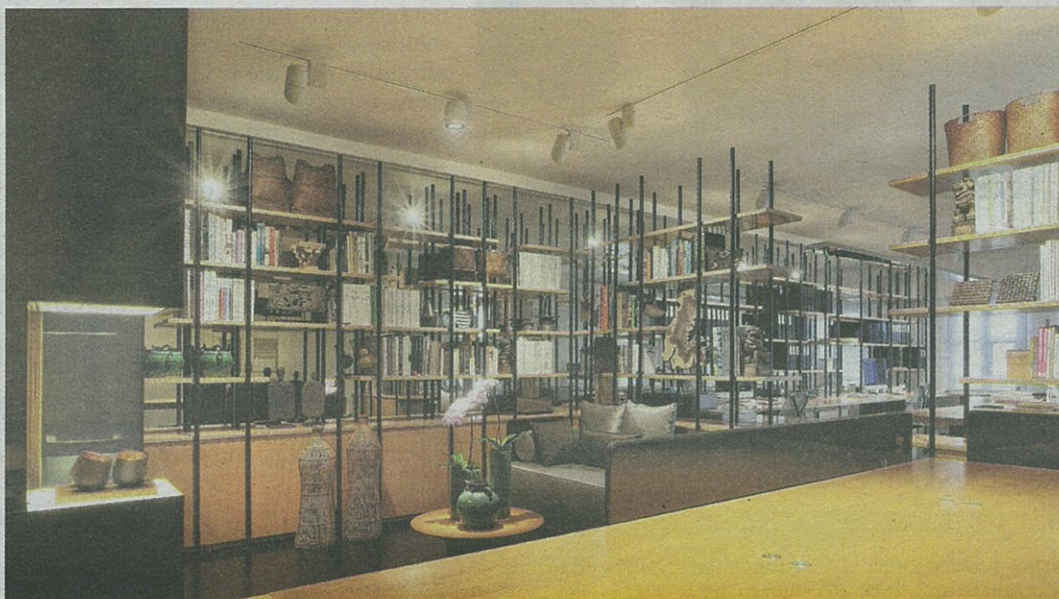
Up next: A mixed development in Beijing with a 300-room hotel.

On Singapore's design scene: Singapore, the duo says, has come a long way to become an important regional design hub. "About half our work is from overseas clients who seek us out for good design. In the big picture, good design can be transformational without necessarily being more expensive," says Mr Soon. But noting the rising cost of doing business, he adds, "We need to keep costs reasonable, or we will lose our competitive edge."

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'WE FIND INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS TO MULTIPLE ISSUES. WE ALSO REFERENCE THE CULTURE AND LOCATION OF THE PROJECT.'

(Left) FDAT's Donovan Soon with Francis Goh (with spectacles). (Right) One of the firm's award-winning office designs



PHOTOS: FDAT

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GREEN STANCE

Interdisciplinary design practice Atelier Small's projects include Westwood Primary School. One of its winning entries (below), in the 2011 URA Hub to Hub Singapore Design competition, is an outdoor space at Stamford Green



PHOTOS: ATELIER SMALL

'WHENEVER A PROJECT ALLOWS, WE TRY TO THINK ABOUT PLANTS AND THEIR QUALITIES; HOW THEY CAN WHISPER AND TALK TO THE BUILDING IN THEIR OWN SILENCE.'

Atelier Small's Quек Li-en (above, left). He is pictured with fellow architect Wu Huei Siang

Atelier Small

www.ateliersmall.com.sg

Established: 2014

Who: Landscaping has largely been a neglected area of design in Singapore. In the past, it has mostly been reserved for larger monumental projects with budgets to match. On a more human scale, landscaping is usually done on an ad hoc basis and it is usually an afterthought.

At Atelier Small, however, Quек Li-en, 29, and Wu Huei Siang, 29, both architecture-trained, believe that landscaping, and perhaps more importantly, nature itself, can unify various aspects of design. "Whenever a project allows, we try to think about plants and their qualities; how they can whisper and talk to the building in their own silence. Plants have the ability to render the richness of spaces when the body moves through it, engaging all our senses at once," says Mr Wu.

Design philosophy: Atelier Small is an interdisciplinary design practice that believes the integration of the built environment with the landscape can be achieved at any scale. At Westwood Primary School, the firm took on a project "on a tight budget" to redesign a long narrow courtyard and create a space – for interaction, contemplation and the appreciation of nature – that has been "scaled to a child's perspective".

Design influences: The Italian architect Carlo Scarpa inspires the designers to "constantly rethink our approach towards designing within the highly complex context of the city". They are also inspired by Muji art director, Kenya Hara.

Up next: With a design for an outdoor space at Stamford Green, the firm bagged one of the winning entries in the 2011 URA Hub to Hub Singapore Design competition. Other projects on a city scale are, so far, theoretical although a competition entry submitted for the URA Public-City: Your Ideas for Public Spaces competition (2014) saw Atelier Small nab another win. Hopefully, it won't be long before Atelier Small gets its hands really dirty.

On Singapore's design scene: While Singapore's cosmopolitan nature is conducive to creativity, the designers feel the level of craftsmanship must be improved. "We can partially make up for this with the aid of technology, but the design industry still lacks widespread intrinsic knowledge in the crafts," says Mr Wu.

OWMF Architecture

www.owmf.net

Established: 2013

Who: Architect Yong Sy Lyng, 34, and designer Tay Yew, 36.

Design philosophy: The job of the architect is to find an inherent quality in any given site and create a design that doesn't compromise the site's use and function. This, says OWMF, is much tougher than it sounds especially when site conditions are challenging and client expectations are high.

Still, it's a challenge that the firm relishes. For a recently completed house in Sembawang called "House at JM", OWMF was asked to redevelop a semi-detached house. Since the site was small, the living and dining areas could not be on the first storey as they are conventionally. The solution involved a paradigm shift. "We took the opportunity to stagger the living spaces on different floors instead of stacking them on top of one another so that the house is connected vertically," explains Ms Yong. The result is an unusual configuration with private, enclosed spaces, such as bedrooms, study and kitchen expressed as volumes and spread apart on the side elevation.

Up next: Several projects over the next couple of years, including three small houses on "tight budgets". With a knack for turning constraints into strengths, big things can be expected.

On Singapore's design scene: Ms Yong would like to see a better understanding of "what good design means" and hopes the new museums in the works and ongoing creative events will go some way towards achieving this.

0932 Design Consultants

www.0932.am

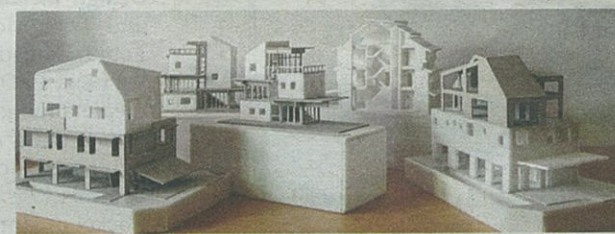
Established: 2011

Who: Low Chee Khiang, 32 and Roystern Goh, 33



'WE TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO STAGGER THE LIVING SPACES ON DIFFERENT FLOORS INSTEAD OF STACKING THEM SO THAT THE HOUSE IS CONNECTED VERTICALLY.'

OWMF Architecture's Yong Sy Lyng (right) on the 'House of JM' project (above). She is pictured with designer Tay Yew. (Below) More of the firm's current projects



Design philosophy: For 0932 Design Consultants, inspiration comes from an appreciation of craftsmanship, materials and simplicity. To date, the architectural and interior design practice has amassed a diverse portfolio of work that includes residential, hospitality and retail design all over Asia.

"We work on projects of any nature and with any requirements," says Mr Low. One of the distinguishing features of 0932's MO is the easy sophistication and sense of luxury it achieves using materials as simple as cold rolled steel or raw concrete. As such, the renovation of an HDB flat looks as elegant as the show suites 0932 created at Green Haven Serviced Apartment Sales Gallery in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

Design influences: "A man who works with his hands is a labourer; a man who works with his hands and his brain is a craftsman; but a man who works with his hands and his brain and his heart is an artist." – US trial lawyer, Louis Nizer

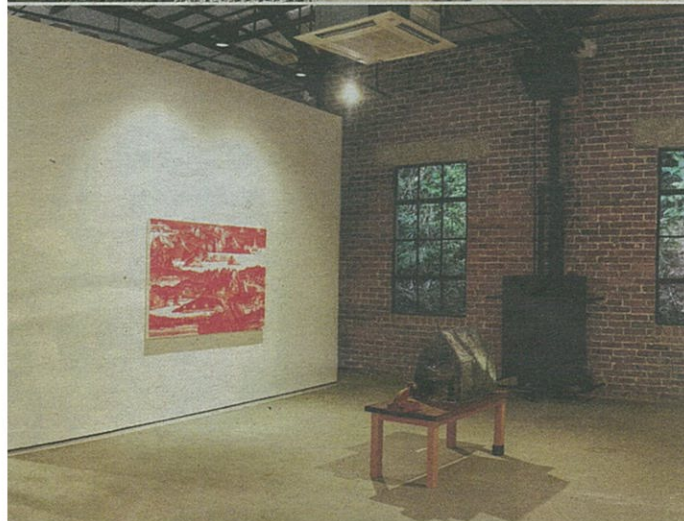
Up next: The firm's ability to manipulate materials is finding them favour with overseas clients. "We are currently working on a few hospitality projects around the region that are due to be completed in 2017," reveals Mr Low.

On Singapore's design scene: Mr Low notes many of the choice jobs still go to big firms or foreign architects. "We hope that there will be more opportunities and platforms for homegrown designers to showcase their talents locally and internationally. In return, these talents will bring recognition back to Singapore and elevate our global design capabilities and identity."



'WE WORK ON PROJECTS OF ANY NATURE AND WITH ANY REQUIREMENTS.'

Loh Chee Khiang of 0932 Design Consultants. He is pictured with Roystern Goh. (Far left and left) Some of the firm's edgy designs



'I THINK THE HISTORY EMBEDDED IN HOW A PLACE WAS BUILT AND USED BY ITS PROPRIETORS IS INSPIRING, IN AND OF ITSELF.'

Brewin's Bobby Cheng. (Above) Mr Cheng's Space Cottonseed Gallery

Brewin Design Office
www.brewindesignoffice.com
Established: 2012

Who: Bobby Cheng, 38

Design philosophy: As an architectural and design firm that focuses on industrial design, Brewin also designs custom furniture pieces using materials in uncommon ways. For example, it uses CNC, an advanced computerised technology to shape its designs.

Design influences: "I think the history embedded in how a place was built and used by its proprietors is inspiring, in and of itself."

Up next: Quite often, the space an art gallery occupies can make an impression as big as the art on display, especially if the design takes on a very conceptual approach. Brewin is currently working on one such gallery space in Hong Kong. "The gallery is based on the metaphysical concept of emptiness," says Mr Cheng. Clad in large slabs of black stone, the main exhibition space will have no natural light except for a single window that frames the foliage on the side of a mountain.

The journey through these spaces is meant to isolate all mental and visual distractions, thus enhancing the viewer's emotional sensitivity while prepping him for the artwork. "Exhibition and gallery space design has the closest relationship to empty spaces, hence it challenges me to think of just the empty volumes, their proportions, finishes and how to light them," adds Mr Cheng who also designed the Space Cottonseed Gallery and Takashi Murakami Gallery, both in Gillman Barracks.

On Singapore's design scene: With its efficiencies and complexities, Singapore has a lot going for it. However, Mr Cheng would like to see more organic growth.

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