

New book celebrates Singapore's modernist architecture

Beyond building design, it documents the influence of modernism in everyday life here

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After Kampung Admiralty was completed in 2017, the mixed-use development was hailed for its integration of homes for seniors with various public facilities, and as a model for future public housing.

But the “vertical kampung” is, in fact, similar in form to one of the first post-independence multi-use developments that the Housing Board introduced five decades ago, notes a new book that documents Singapore's modern built environment.

Titled *Everyday Modernism: Architecture & Society in Singapore*, the book – co-authored by architectural historian Chang Jiat-Hwee and design writer Justin Zhuang – was launched on Tuesday. It includes more than 100 photographs by architectural photographer Darren Soh.

Comparing Kampung Admiralty to HDB's 1968 Park Road development, a mixed-use project that integrated a three-storey commercial podium with a five-storey residential slab block, Mr Zhuang said: “The past comes back in

different ways.”

“A lot of people see integrated developments as very innovative, very new, but they have a lineage that goes much further back,” said the 38-year-old, who added that the book helps readers to understand the everyday environment they live in.

Dr Chang, 49, an associate professor at National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture, said the book was born from a realisation that modernism in Singapore is much more than the country's iconic modern architecture – widely feted works of heroic architecture that include the now-demolished Pearl Bank Apartments and the National Theatre.

Rather, modernism in Singapore is present in all aspects of Singaporeans' lives, said Dr Chang, citing schools, cinemas, libraries and even transport interchanges whose “form follow function” – a hallmark of modernist buildings, which are known for optimisation over ornamentation.

Mr Soh, 46, said modernism has had an overstated influence in Singapore's architecture as the coun-

try's nation-building years came in the middle of the global modern era, which spans roughly the 1930s to the 1980s.

The need to rapidly industrialise and build mass public housing also accelerated the adoption of modern building designs, said Dr Chang, as they could be easily replicated.

The Park Road project – known today as People's Park – is a case in point. HDB built 15 other podium towers across Singapore's central

area up until the 1980s, including Rochor Centre and Bras Basah Complex.

While many of Singapore's modern buildings have been demolished, the bulk of the country's built environment remains modern, said Mr Soh, citing the ubiquitous HDB blocks which more than 80 per cent of local residents live in.

But this seemingly similar exterior belies the unique social histories of each of Singapore's modern

buildings, said Mr Zhuang, who added that buildings come alive based on how they are used, and not just based on their design.

To that end, the book captures the life of Singapore's modernist developments through 32 essays, each covering various typologies, which fills a gap in documentation on them, said Mr Zhuang. The documentation of buildings is typically centred around conception and demolition, he said, which omits what happens in between.



The Park Road project – known today as People's Park – was one of the developments highlighted by the authors. It was among the first post-independence, mixed-use developments built by the Housing Board. It was completed in 1968. PHOTO: DARREN SOH

One essay is dedicated to cinema-churches – churches that have taken over purpose-built cinemas, while another details how the former Singapore Badminton Hall was adapted into an entertainment centre.

While some of the buildings featured in the book have been demolished while its authors were working on it, such as Bedok Swimming Complex and the CPF Building in Robinson Road, the authors said its contents were not intended as heritage advocacy, but for awareness and education.

“The book is a documentation of a period of time, but we are not suggesting that that period has ended,” said Dr Chang, citing how HDB's podium tower typology made a return in Clementi in 2011 after a three-decade absence, in the form of flats built above The Clementi Mall.

Everyday Modernism is published by Ridge Books Singapore, a brand under NUS Press. The National Heritage Board supported the project with a grant.

The book can be purchased at the NUS Press web store, and is available at 20 per cent off until Nov 30 with the code “MOD-ERN20”.

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