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IN CONVERSATION: MIKE WOOD AND SRILALITHA GOPALAKRISHNAN



INTERVIEW
PORTRAIT
IMAGES

» NARELLE YABUKA
» TAWAN CONCHONNET
» COURTESY OF GRANT ASSOCIATES
AND TIERRA DESIGN

TWO SINGAPORE-BASED LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS – ONE OF THEM A COUNCIL MEMBER OF THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS (SILA) – DISCUSS THEIR INDUSTRY'S NEW ACCREDITATION PROGRAMME AND THE ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Above: Mike Wood of Grant Associates and Srilalitha Gopalakrishnan of Tierra Design, in the Tierra Design office



IN OCTOBER THIS YEAR, THE PLAYING FIELD FOR landscape architects in Singapore shifted significantly with the introduction of a new accreditation programme. The process of accreditation, having been set in motion by SILA, is now managed independently by the DesignSingapore Council. Srilalitha Gopalakrishnan, a SILA council member and an Associate at Singaporean studio Tierra Design, was active in the preparatory work, and is among Singapore's first cohort of accredited landscape architects. Mike Wood is a Senior Associate at Grant Associates Singapore. He, too, will seek accreditation once he has clocked a third year of experience here (the minimum requirement). They discuss why accreditation was needed and why there's now a push for a 'qualified professional' status for landscape architects in Singapore.



Top: A rendering by Grant Associates of the landscaped amenity deck at the Capitol development. Architecture by Richard Meier & Partners and Architects 61

Bottom: Grant Associates designed the landscape at the Institute of Technical Education in Ang Mo Kio (architecture by RSP Architects Planners & Engineers). Photo courtesy of Grant Associates

Srilalitha Gopalakrishnan (SG) In the Singapore context, there's been no clear definition of what a landscape architect is because we've not been looked at as qualified professionals. So when we [SILA] went about the accreditation process, our first idea was to establish what a landscape architect is. There was an international memorandum signed between the International Federation of Landscape Architects and the International Union of Architects that defined what an architect is and what a landscape architect is. We used that as our basis.

Mike Wood (MW) It's unfortunate that landscape architecture, and landscape architects, often have to struggle for professional recognition in Singapore.

SG It is, but we hope that through all these processes, people will slowly start acknowledging the profession more.

MW I would say the momentum is building. Would you agree?

SG Yes definitely. The government agencies are starting to recognise it more. After that we hope it will filter down to the private developers and other clients.

MW I think the level of respect granted to the landscape architecture profession still needs to be boosted. I say that based on what I often encounter in my day-to-day practice.

SG Actually that's a point SILA has recognised. For us to get that recognition, we needed to set up certain benchmarks, certain standards. In Singapore, architects are actually the lead consultants and the qualified professionals [QPs] who do all the submissions. Unfortunately, even the NParks [National Parks Board] submissions that are purely to do with planting must also go through architects. There has always been this idea that a QP must be responsible for things, and because landscape architects are not QPs, they are not answerable to things.

Once we have a set of accredited landscape architects who are fully qualified to meet all the basic requirements of practice, then we can pitch for the government to consider giving us that professional status too. So accreditation is a first step toward that.

MW When did SILA begin working on the accreditation programme?

SG About four years ago. We did a lot of research into other programmes – in the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia. We rolled out continuing professional development points two years ago. People started getting into the idea of training and keeping themselves at pace with the industry. This year it's become mandatory. If you don't do it, you can't get accredited. We found that

everyone was very positive about it. There was a lot of support from the entire fraternity.

MW Globally, the role of landscape architecture is becoming more and more prominent, particularly for larger-scale projects. And although landscape architects are not officially recognised as QPs, I think our role is slowly becoming more recognised and respected here in Singapore. There has been a shift in the official mindset, as you said. I think this shift is a credit to the government agencies in terms of their overarching vision for a city in a garden.

SG It will be even more important going forward. Everyone talks about future cities as vertical cities. Landscape is no longer just on the ground plane. Architecture and landscape are actually very interrelated, and, moving ahead, there won't be a clear line you can draw between them. In Singapore specifically, with the push for the LUSH [Landscaping for Urban Spaces and High-Rises] programme, the authorities are looking at 100 per cent green replacement. That means landscape cannot be thought of as an afterthought; it will have to be integrated from day one.

MW It's an exciting time. Look at the shift that has taken place in attitudes even during the relatively short time span of my career here. I've been in Singapore only for two years, but I've been practicing for about 16 years in the UK and Australia. In that 16-year period, I've noticed a dramatic change of interest. It's exactly what you're talking about. Now landscape architects are beginning to get involved right at the outset of the design, so that we can integrate thoughts and processes. Singapore is – in my experience – at the forefront of that.

SG I've been in Singapore for about 11 years. I have seen the change too. A big step I have seen in the last three-to-four years is that even the agencies are actually acknowledging that there needs to be integration. A good example is the approach to water-sensitive urban design to manage urban storm water, which requires the PUB [Public Utilities Board], URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority], BCA [Building and Construction Authority] and LTA [Land Transport Authority] to work together. That means the PUB, for instance, needs the input of architects and landscape architects in addition to engineers for bioengineering solutions for water drainage. When we see that change happening in the government agencies, it's a very encouraging sign.

MW Horticulture, ecology, architecture, landscape architecture, engineering – we're all in our clients' and society's projects together. The sooner we realise that, the better. We now need to make sure those

high-level strategic decisions are filtered through to the grassroots level. That's taking time.

Nowadays being a landscape architect is not just about knowing your plant species; it's about how these various disciplines work together, how they integrate. It's about acknowledging how things will be built. What this accreditation does, to my way of thinking, is it subtly reminds us that we've got to keep going; we've got to continually challenge ourselves because otherwise we're not going to maintain this exciting momentum.

SG For me it's a validation of what we are doing, and to make sure people sit up and acknowledge that there is a big role being played by landscape architects. Acknowledgement is something that has been lacking in Singapore. We need government agencies to accept the accreditation, because if they don't use it as criteria for their tenders, it's of little relevance.

There are a lot of people practising landscape architecture in Singapore who are not necessarily qualified to do so. Accreditation creates parameters so that anyone hiring a landscape architect can be certain they will be working with a verified professional who is trained to offer a specific service and expertise.

MW In Singapore and Southeast Asia, where the opportunities for landscape architecture are growing immensely, it's absolutely right that a

client should be able to do a due diligence check. "Are they accredited? Do I know what I'm going to get as an end result?" I've already found that in this region, the demands are higher for gaining trust and winning work from clients.

SG When I first moved here from India, I found Singapore's scene much more professional than where I came from. But once I started really getting into the work, I realised there is always this grey area around who is responsible for what. That was frustrating. Water features and irrigation for example – who takes responsibility for their system design?

So when I joined the SILA council about four years ago, that was one of my prime agendas. I said that we needed to do something about this, because when it comes to tendering, costing, variations and those contractual liabilities, that's where it becomes extremely tricky. I felt there needed to be something concrete we could refer to and say, "This is the scope of a landscape architect." And that has come about with the accreditation.

MW So how many accredited landscape architects are there at Tierra?

SG We have six out of a total pool of 18 design staff, about nine of which are landscape architects.

MW Our office is a bit smaller. We have 12 people altogether and two of those are accredited.

SG So far, Singapore has 114 accredited landscape architects in total.



Left: Tierra Design created the landscape at the PARKROYAL on Pickering (architecture by WOHA). Photo by Amir Sultan

Right: The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (architecture by W Architects), with landscape by Tierra Design. Photo by Jordan Bates

“ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS SOMETHING THAT HAS BEEN LACKING IN SINGAPORE. WE NEED GOVERNMENT AGENCIES TO ACCEPT THE ACCREDITATION, BECAUSE IF THEY DON’T USE IT AS CRITERIA FOR THEIR TENDERS, IT’S OF LITTLE RELEVANCE.”

» SRILALITHA GOPALAKRISHNAN



MW In light of the accreditation programme, I’d like to ask what you think about the Singapore government’s procurement strategy for the larger projects here – about reaching out to international firms. Do you think they should now grow to become more confident in local landscape architecture firms?

SG I think there are two reasons why we have to compete with the big international firms on large projects here. One is the scale of the projects. Maybe they feel that the smaller companies are not set up to handle projects of that magnitude. Second, the way Singapore operates is that advertising or promoting things internationally is important. If it’s a very large project of a national scale, they want to make sure that there are big names attached to it so they can attract more recognition internationally. That kind of attitude is not something that will change overnight. It will take a long time.

As I said we’re not yet recognised as qualified professionals. So it is going to take a lot of effort for a Singapore landscape firm to be trusted to do a large-scale project.

MW Yes. But Singapore is incredibly rich in its talent for landscape architecture for such a small place. Would you agree?

SG Yes, we are way ahead in a lot of things and the world is catching up.

MW I think that attitude will change. I acknowledge that for some big projects Singapore has had, they should reach out internationally. But for smaller projects, especially if they’re located within the heartlands of Singapore, then I wonder if it would be better to use our local talent to generate ideas that are going to be meaningful and appropriate in that context. I’m interested in your view. I think we need a mixture of talent pools, I agree. But maybe we need to look at the balance of that decision-making process a little more.

SG It’s been a big shift to even get some of these projects to be acknowledged as landscape-driven projects. It has taken a long time for NParks or the URA to acknowledge that a park project needs a landscape architect as the lead consultant, and perhaps an architect do the submissions as a sub-consultant. The way the Rail Corridor project was handled, for example, was a big step in that direction, where the authorities acknowledged that they needed a landscape architect to be the lead and not necessarily an architect.

MW Do you think there are any downsides to accreditation?

SG Yes and no. It’s important that whoever is accredited is extremely aware of what is written in

the handbook and makes sure they give at least that minimum amount of service if they commit to any contract. But I don’t really see that as a downside.

MW The younger generation might be seeing downsides. There are some who might feel it’s a bit onerous – that’s one of the comments I’ve received. There’s also probably a danger that some landscape architects might say, “Ok I’ve gotten accredited, that’s it. That’s as far as I can go in my profession.” I hope people will continually push themselves.

SG That’s one of the reasons we’ve made it a one-year validation. We don’t want people to get complacent. But once the agencies make it mandatory for an accredited landscape architect to be involved in their projects, people will in a way be required to be accredited. That’s the only way we can sustain it. The long-term vision, as I said, is to obtain qualified professional status. I’m sure that one of the requirements will be that you’ve been accredited for a consistent span of years.

DesignSingapore is encouraging every design industry to get accreditation going. We were one of the first ones to be ready for it, because we’ve been doing our homework the last four years. So the moment they said, “We are here and we are willing to give you monetary and authoritative support,” we could just go in. The rest of the associations are taking cues from us and trying to build up their own industries to that level.

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Left: Tierra designed a verdant landscape at the Ocean Financial Centre (architecture by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects and Architects 61). Photo by Amir Sultan