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## Grounded ideals

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IT may not be evident at first, but landscaping can make all the difference between a cold concrete block and a space that is alive and welcoming. For their efforts in creating acclaimed living spaces in Singapore and overseas, landscape architects Colin K Okashimo and Franklin Po were named Designers of the Year at this year's President's Design Award. They are joined by architect Siew Man Kok, who recently won the design proposal to turn the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station into a community space.

**Franklin Po**

**Tierra Design**

BEING a landscape architect in a garden city isn't quite the same as letting a kid loose in a candy store but if you've spent a lifetime figuring out ways to make mundane spaces beautiful - turning bland into grand as it were - then having an eye for detail while retaining a childlike appreciation for all things great and small certainly helps.

As a young architecture student at UCLA in 1970, Franklin Po never forgot a tutorial session he had with modernist architect Yoshio Taniguchi, whose initial response to Mr Po's graduate school project was succinct and to the point. "He told me, 'So what? There's nothing exciting about it. What if I told you there was no gravity - how would you design?' So I learned not to set limits, to think out of the box.

"I've used that philosophy ever since," says Mr Po, 69. "What we've been trying to do is keep pushing limits and asking ourselves, 'so what?'" That approach has earned Mr Po, principal and creative director at Tierra Design, a reputation as a forward-thinker and a slew of awards, culminating in a 2015 President's Design Award as Designer of the Year.

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After working as an architect in California and more than three decades away from Singapore, Mr Po returned in 1993 and two years later became a founding partner at Tierra, overcoming resistance about the notion of integrating landscape design into the architectural process and cutting his teeth on residential projects by noted

architects such as Kerry Hill and Ernesto Bedmar. Over the past 20 years, the firm's main contribution has been to find new and better ways of beautifying the environment for the user.

The objective, he says, was always to improve the environment for people by looking at oft-overlooked spaces around a building and the way builders organised essential but unsightly utility services such as open drains, sewer lines and parking spaces. "By understanding how these systems worked and how to lay out sewers and drainage lines, we could free up land for much better use - it was a new way of beautifying the environment for the user."

He adds: "I remember people telling me, 'Don't do architecture', but we tweaked it so that building surfaces became part of the landscape, swimming pools became reflecting ponds. And why couldn't garden walls make a statement?" Over the past 20 years, many of the features that define work done by Tierra - water walls, hanging gardens and textured themes - have become design staples in Singapore and the region. Distinctive projects such as the 300-metre-long garden wall at Changi Airport's T3 and the Parkroyal at Pickering hotel speak to that ongoing philosophy. Mr Po also came up with the concept design for the Marina Barrage.

"I don't look at projects for aesthetics," says Mr Po. "I go through the process and ensure that all stages are done properly - then the outcome will be there. An architect can take any form and turn it into good architecture; out of the process comes design." He adds: "Good design is not just some processed idea - the best products are the ones that are looked at from outside in and inside out."

To achieve that end, Mr Po insists that potential clients answer an extensive questionnaire that takes every possible requirement into consideration, such as community and privacy issues, even nitty-gritty

details such as how a family might want to do the laundry. "I learnt that from (American architect) Charles Moore," says Mr Po. "The more you understand life, the better you may be at doing what you're good at."

The recognition accorded by the President's Design Award is an indication that the work done by Tierra is of a certain quality and consistency. "It's a meaningful prize - hopefully people will listen to me more," he says, adding that integrative design - the art of creating something more important than what you started with - will be the norm in the future. "We're not there yet, but we're on the right track."

Mr Po's first love is still architecture and his approach to landscape design has always been guided by strong architectural principles developed during a career in California. "I stumbled into landscaping," he says. "My whole approach is architectural - in the US, you take care of the environment too."

Mr Po adds that he intends to remain active in the industry. "I think we have an edge because I'm still at the helm and the idealism I had in college is still there - that's not changed."

**By Geoffrey Eu**

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**Colin K Okashimo**

**Colin K Okashimo and Associates**

IN order to shed some creative light on a potential landscape project, there's a good chance that Colin K Okashimo will arrive when the site is still shrouded in cool pre-dawn darkness. Then he finds a quiet spot

to meditate. It's his way of unlocking nature's secrets, along with the landscaping options presented by the site. Some might call his methods unusual. Dr Okashimo calls it research.

In a fast-paced world where time is money and the dictates of the urban lifestyle can be overwhelming, his response is to create a sense of calm - a garden space protected by positive energy. Dr Okashimo, who arrived in Singapore almost 33 years ago for a six-week project and never left, will go way past what's necessary to craft the physical from the philosophical.

Extensive research - including meditating on site - is not only a part of the process, it's a condition of the commission, whether it's a small garden in a private home or a masterplan for a major project. "Doing the research and leaving no stone unturned enables us to give our clients the blueprint to determine the way forward," says Dr Okashimo, 57. "It's unlocking full value in a responsible way."

For him, "Meditating in the morning, getting to a place to witness the birth of the day and experiencing the site in its quietest moments, sensing that calmness we want to respect when we make an intervention in the land" is all essential to the design process. "It's part of the research of the site on an intuitive level. Other designers take site photos - in a way it's a shortcut - but what we do is a different kind of sensitivity that picks up on the nuances, which we then somehow bring into the work."

Dr Okashimo, who was presented as a Designer of the Year winner at the President's Design Awards, is a third-generation Japanese-Canadian who grew up in Toronto. On the way to becoming a landscape architect, he turned into a sculptor, working primarily with

natural materials such as stone and marble. He later completed a PhD thesis on the works of Japanese-American artist - and landscape architect - Isamu Noguchi.

As a landscape design student in Canada, Dr Okashimo took a required course in sculpture, which had a lasting influence on his approach to both disciplines, as can be seen in the organic sculptures that are carefully integrated in most of his commissions. The garden designs don't have to include his sculptures - "They're not a deal-breaker but people understand why it needs to be there," he says - but to a large extent, they do complete the picture.

It was his sculpture teacher in college who helped to define his future work, says Dr Okashimo. "He was very passionate and stressed the importance of having clarity of intent - you've got to be clear about what you're doing, otherwise it's not worth doing." He adds: "To see that it's not just an intuitive process, that there could be specific principles involved, gave me a certain comfort and confidence."

Within the context of his landscape work, Dr Okashimo is continually exploring and interpreting the relationship between design and art. "Design answers questions and serves a functional requirement, whereas art is much more open-ended and provides a basis from which to question the norms," he says. "I felt liberated when I discovered that maybe the question is more important than the answer."

Dr Okashimo's sculptures express a certain duality - rough surfaces interspersed with smooth ones, straight lines and sharp edges among wave-shapes, hollowed-out spaces that invite people to pause and reflect. "It's about the ephemeral nature of those forms versus the permanence of nature," he says. Creating oases of calm allows people to - if only briefly - forget the daily grind and bring it down a notch or

two in search of a more contemplative state of mind. Needless to say, he isn't a big fan of smartphones or social media. And don't call him if you're planning to build a theme park.

You don't have to be into sculpture or meditation to work at Colin K Okashimo and Associates - but it helps. "If I could just get the average person to pause, to experience a state of calm, I'd be happy," says Dr Okashimo, who meditates daily no matter the weather conditions "and when my state of mind is different".

Clients expect answers on time and within budget, he says. "A lot of times, we embellish the brief, meet the requirement and go beyond it. Rather than just place sculptures within the landscape, we create an experience that's mutually rewarding."

Every site has its challenges but Dr Okashimo doesn't back off from them. "I don't make them a burden because it can affect your ability to see things," he adds, "Whether those things are good or bad, that's just the way it is."

**By Geoffrey Eu**

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**Siew Man Kok**

**MKPL Architects**

INTEGRATING nature with architecture is an important aspect of architect Siew Man Kok's work. While this applies to architecture at any scale, Mr Siew believes that on a larger urban scale, it can even help communities "cultivate a sense of ownership of public amenities".

Describing a design proposal for a potential public housing development along the Rail Corridor, Mr Siew, 53, explains that he designed a "linear forest" as an integral part of the design of the

residential blocks because he wanted to instil a sense of "rootedness" in the housing estate. "Since time is needed to grow a forest, hopefully the community here will grow up with it. It's a very literal sense of rootedness," he adds.

Mr Siew is also the chairman and director of MKPL Architects. Since MKPL was established in 1995, the firm has made a name for itself with projects that have incorporated nature and landscaping in interesting ways.

For the Visitor Centre at the Hort Park (completed in 2007), the roof design was inspired by the canopy of a rainforest, with parts of it perforated so that visitors can experience rainstorms without getting completely soaked.

At a condominium he designed called SkyPark (completed in 2010), special attention was given to the layout so that homeowners exit the lift on their floor and cross a small private garden before entering their units - as one might in a landed home.

With the design proposal for the Rail Corridor, however, the gesture of incorporating nature is much grander, with aerial bridges and communal decks forming a network of linkages that will make the 50m-wide linear forest more accessible. Mr Siew also envisaged water bodies that transform flood plains into landscape features that he hopes will encourage interaction and even play. "There's no need to be afraid of the rain. Just treat it as a natural phenomenon and live with it," he says.

And these ideas seem to have taken root. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which made the Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Rail Corridor in March, selected MKPL's design concept last month, over four other short-listed firms for further consideration.



This recognition has come at the end of an eventful year for the National University of Singapore architecture graduate. Not only has he been selected as one of the three winners of the President's Design Award/Designer of the Year 2015, his masterplan for the Housing Development Board's (HDB) highly anticipated Bidadari Estate in Toa Payoh was also unveiled for the first time (November). And it does not disappoint.

To say that Mr Siew created a new paradigm for public housing in Singapore with the Bidadari Estate is no mere hyperbole. Until now, public housing estates have been planned pragmatically, with amenities and recreational facilities such as parks relegated to specific zones, almost detached from the residential blocks. However, when Mr Siew decided to participate in the design competition for the 2,000-plus unit Bidadari Estate about three years ago, he began with the contention that all residents should be able to step out of their flats and into a park. "Why should a void deck just be a void deck?" he asked.

To achieve this utopian ideal, he had to coordinate with the many different government agencies that oversee our parks, water bodies and roads including the National Parks Board, Public Utilities Board and Land and Transport Authority. And with a nod from HDB, a more holistic masterplan for Bidadari Estate was created, with housing blocks set within the park, giving residents immediate access to the greenery and public spaces. "We made the whole (estate) a completely integrated design with invisible boundaries."

As a Singaporean who grew up in a kampong, then watched as the 3-room HDB flat in Tao Payoh (that he and his parents and siblings would eventually move into) was constructed from ground up, Mr Siew is particularly interested in improving the quality of public housing. "Public housing has a strong social agenda compared to private

housing where developers are more likely to be concerned about the square footage for sale," he adds. He even shares that he turned down a commission to design a private condominium so that he could devote more of MKPL's resources to social and civic architecture. "After practising for 20 years, I want to design architecture that can benefit the general public," he says.

**By Arthur Sim**

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