

Leong Man Wei

Professors Desmond Pang, Serena, Pang, Ash Y.S. Seo

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Designing for the Future in Singapore

Identify characteristic ideologies which define currently local design practices, describe the qualities of design works which define them, that have meaningful impact on social cultural norms of Singapore or International Asia?

There is a utilitarian emphasis for local design to solve problems and create impact; it has an economic and social agenda (DesignSingapore Council 26). Hence it is characterised by a visionary, forward-looking ethos whereby innovation and sustainability are key ideologies (DesignSingapore Council 5). Presently, local design guided by these two principles show potential for meaningful impact on social cultural norms in Singapore. However, it might be possible to push this potential by engaging more critical thought on how these principles are applied.

The spirit of innovation defines not only the technical but also conceptual approaches in local design practice. In the technical aspect, innovation commonly involves integrating rising technologies like AR. From exhibition design to marketing publicity, these technologies are becoming a design trend. One example of a design campaign using AR is Tiger Beer's "Born In Singapore" campaign (Fig 1). Its bottles' labels use AR to make graphics of buildings pop out and enlarge details on Facebook Camera (Tay). Besides technically, conceptually, this design campaign also takes an innovative approach. It aims to

revitalise the presentation and understanding of concepts of place and cultural identity in Singapore, by designing fresh unique AR designs for different neighbourhoods (Tay). Many local designers are preoccupied with reimagining the “established” and familiar with fresh perspectives for more meaningful engagement with traditions. Underlying this trend is the desire to establish a unique brand for Singapore in the international market and explore new ways of creating a vibrant culture and sense of belonging among Singaporeans (DesignSingapore Council 23). Against the threat of cultural dilution due to globalization, such design has meaningful impact on local social cultural norms. RUBBISH FAMzine (Fig 1), Hans Tan Studio and SUPERMAMA (Fig 2) all capture the spirit of innovation in their design approach to Singapore’s culture (Tan). Notably, Hans Tan’s “Spotted Nyonya” (Fig 3) is a transformation of not only the vase’s Nyonya traditions, but the object itself too. The vase was sourced from an old shop in Sims Avenue and repurposed for his design (DesignSingapore Council). This brings me to the other dominant ideology of sustainability in local design practices today.

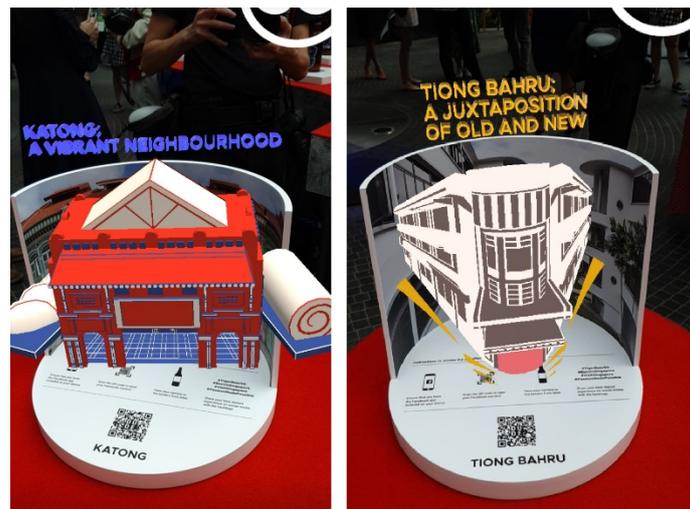


Fig 1: Tay, Rachel. “The Red House at Katong (left) and Tiong Bahru old school flats (right).” *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.sg/tiger-beer-hid-ar-features-on-its-singapore-themed-bottles-but-youll-only-find-them-on-these-4-designs/>.



From left to right:

Fig 2: Holycrap. “Rubbish Famzine Issue No.6 An Emoijious Odyssey of the Gluttonous Omnivores.” *Welovead*, www.welovead.com/en/works/details/b61whooxg.

Fig 3: Supermama. “Kebaya Bleu Blue 24cm Porcelain Piece.” *Supermama Store*, 2019, <https://supermamastore.com/products/kebaya-bleu-24cm-porcelain-piece>

Fig 4: Tan, Hans. “Spotted Nyonya: Vessel with Cover L.” *Hans Tan*, 2011, hanstan.net/works/detail/spotted-nyonya.

Given the pressing issue of climate change today, environmental sustainability is a rising ideology characteristic of local design. It has increasingly shaped material choices and production methods. Many local designers use repurposed materials like canvas and tarps to make tote bags. Others favour packaging materials that can be recycled or reused. Sandy Ong’s “Square Conversation” zero-waste clothing line makes use of every off-cut from the pattern-cutting process in clothing production (Heng D3). Beyond material and production, the sustainability ideology also shapes the functions of local designs. Increasingly, products are designed to minimise waste: metal straws, menstrual cups, reusable tumblers etc. Local design guided by sustainability is meaningful in cultivating the same mindset of eco-consciousness and responsibility in the Singaporean consumer.

As an ending note, to generate more meaningful impact through design, there is perhaps a need for local designers to constantly evaluate the degree of innovation in their practice. As much as design is shaped by culture, design also *shapes* culture. When innovating with traditions, designers need to cautiously balance preservation and

reinterpretation. Whereas in integrating technologies like AR, designers could evaluate more *critically*, how meaningful or necessary they are in conveying messages, instead of blindly hopping onto the bandwagon to be “innovative”. There might assumptions in the convenience and accessibility of these technologies to the masses, as well as risks to social connectedness and people’s attachment to reality in their ubiquitous application. I do not oppose forward-looking innovation for conservativeness but propose instead a more critical integration of new technologies. The history of design points to how various movements have responded to the industrial revolution with different extents of integrating technology in design, as opposed to an all-encompassing embrace. On the other hand, in design for sustainability, it might benefit to ask if local designers are innovating *enough*. There is nothing very radical or avant-garde presently. Radically, harnessing the abovementioned AR more meaningfully for sustainability, could involve all non-functional decorative branding designs transferred to the AR realm, as an argumentative stance against consumerism. While the Memphis’ anti-consumerist and anti-functionality ideologies (Martini) seems unlikely in utilitarian Singapore, product design could still denounce consumerism more innovatively *while* preserving functionality. In design history, the rise of egalitarian values have increased the layman’s accessibility to design and creative role within—the democratisation of computers and sharing of programming knowledge in an open-source culture (Clary), the transfer of the assembly role to consumers in IKEA’s flatpack furniture etc (Cassinger). Taking inspiration from this, future designs could empower consumers to DIY sustainable products that are presently manufactured *for* them and costly sold. Local designers could produce affordable, portable machines that provide users with technologies to upcycle plastic waste into dishware or bags easily *by themselves*.

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