

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Lawrence Chua

**Jiat-Hwee Chang, Justin Zhuang, and Darren Soh. *Everyday Modernism: Architecture & Society in Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, December 2023, pp. 555-558.

**How to Cite:** Chua, Lawrence. Review of *Everyday Modernism: Architecture & Society in Singapore* by Jiat-Hwee Chang, Justin Zhuang, and Darren Soh. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, December 2023, pp. 555-558. DOI: 10.20495/seas.12.3\_555.

## Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2023/12/vol-12-no-3-book-reviews-lawrence-chua/>

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2023/12/vol-12-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

## For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp





*Everyday Modernism: Architecture & Society in Singapore*

JIAI-HWEE CHANG, JUSTIN ZHUANG, and DARREN SOH

Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

Social housing is central to the history of modernism in architecture. It was in the *Siedlungen* of industrialized Central Europe that architects first began to deploy idioms that are now universal standards for urban development: coherently planned, flat-roofed blocks of identical housing grouped along common leisure areas and conveniences, well integrated with urban transportation infrastructures. Early efforts on the part of architects like Ernst May, Adolf Meyer, Walter Gropius, and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky were fueled by concerns over working-class living conditions; but when their ideas about architecture were appropriated in the United States, they were largely stripped of their socialist political agency and reduced to a stylistic innovation. With few exceptions, the history of architectural modernism in other parts of the world has largely remained on the periphery of this narrative of European invention and imitative global diffusion. This is due in part to a historiographical bias toward a canon of exceptional building projects designed by a largely European, largely male avant-garde in the twentieth century. The history of the modern global built environment, a landscape made up of unexceptional, everyday buildings, remains largely untold. *Everyday Modernism: Architecture & Society in Singapore* makes a notable contribution to this elision in historical knowledge about modernist architecture and urban planning. By underscoring the importance of quotidian encounters with modernist architecture, *Everyday Modernism* not only illuminates a history of modernism in Southeast Asian architecture, it also poses an important challenge to conventional architectural historiography in underscoring the importance of state institutions in the production of modernist architecture. At the same time, the book poses a challenge to scholars of Southeast Asian cities in that it demands a re-evaluation of modernity's aesthetics that is not separate from the region's political economy.

The book's authors—architectural historian Jiat-Hwee Chang, design journalist Justin Zhuang, and photographer Darren Soh—have organized the book's 32 illustrated essays into six sections, each named after a verb (Live, Play, Work, Travel, Connect, and Pray). This structure is intended to connect the buildings' forms with their uses and gives an impression, if not a definition, of what

the authors mean by the “everyday.” Folios of color photographs by Soh introduce and conclude the volume, offering readers a tantalizing view of the beauty of Singapore’s modernist landscape. These are buildings that the general public interact with on a daily basis as they go about their lives in Singapore. While the book’s content is not preoccupied solely with housing, the first chapter on public housing really grounds the rest of the book. The cinemas, shopping centers, playgrounds, commercial centers, car parks, public schools, libraries, community centers, churches, mosques, columbaria, and (importantly) hawker centers that constitute the fabric of everyday life in Singapore all seem to orbit around social housing. Although the buildings treated in the book are drawn from Singapore’s colonial and post-independence periods, the majority focus on the buildings and landscapes that were planned and built during the era of rapid socioeconomic modernization and nation-building following Singapore’s independence in 1965. The scope of this history accounts for the diversity that one sees in Singapore’s housing stock today: from the low-rise artisans’ quarters and walk-up apartments in Tiong Bahru to the slab block podium-tower People’s Park development (pp. 86–92).

Although the colonial period saw the establishment of the Public Works Department and the Singapore Improvement Trust tasked with the early urban development of Singapore, the authors note that it was only with decolonization that modernism transformed the Singaporean environment (p. 69). In short, Singapore went from being the southernmost entrepôt of a peninsular colony to a state in a federated nation to being an island nation-state, necessitating new strategies on the part of the ruling People’s Action Party to maintain its sovereignty: orienting industrialization toward export, stabilizing industrial relations, disciplining the labor force, and efficiently using space. The government pursued a strategy of decentralization—of moving the population out of the city center and into self-contained communities served by commercial, educational, recreational, religious, and even industrial facilities that were autonomous from the city center (p. 70). Key to this transformation was the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which took over from the Singapore Improvement Trust as the state agency that is perhaps the most responsible for the look of Singapore’s housing today. Along with the Jurong Town Corporation, which took over from the post-independence-era Economic Development Board, these agencies figure prominently in the history of Singapore’s built environment. Integrating them into a history of design, as the authors have done, is an important historiographical intervention. It foregrounds important relationships between bureaucratic institutions and individual designers in the production of modernism and points to the ways both aesthetic and political concerns guided the developmental state. It also suggests that, counter to canonical histories of modernist architecture, good design does not spring from the minds of genius architects fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus, but is produced through critical negotiations between different stakeholders.

An excellent example of the kind of architecture that was developed through the HDB is People’s Park or the Park Road Redevelopment (1968), the agency’s first podium-tower develop-

ment. It was one of the earliest projects in the country's massive urban renewal program and replaced an informal settlement with a multi-use building that integrated housing with shops. Designed by HDB architects Tan Wee Lee and Peter B. K. Soo, the building consisted of a three-story podium with shops and eating stalls, a five-story residential slab block with 130 apartments above it, and a "void deck" between the two. The void deck would become a signature feature of HDB design: a common area that could be filled with community facilities like childcare centers and senior citizen clubs, and even be rented out for weddings (p. 88). As part of a larger resettlement scheme, People's Park was highly successful. Its commercial podium could accommodate all of the local shops and stalls that had been displaced by the redevelopment, giving them what the HDB called "essentially the same area but in much better and more hygienic surroundings" (p. 93).

As the People's Park case indicates, hygiene and public health figured prominently in motivating the modernist renovation of Singapore as they did in other parts of the world. However, particularly in Singapore, rehousing eating stalls and shops was an important part of the development of "everyday modernism" in the new republic. In the 1970s the government embarked on a program of rehousing street hawkers, citing poor hygiene standards that threatened public health. It seems no surprise, then, that the authors have devoted a section to the purpose-built centers that the government built to accommodate these businesses as part of a five-year plan initiated in 1970. The plan aimed to resettle some twenty-five thousand street hawkers. However, the plan proved too ambitious, and it was not until 1986 that the government finally rehoused the city's last street hawkers. The purpose-built developments that the government built were sited in the many emerging public housing estates as well as near workspaces and even in public recreational facilities. The various government agencies that undertook the construction of hawker centers had different formal approaches. Those built by the HDB were part of its new towns and often came in the form of a double-volume, single-story building that combined cooked-food vendors and a wet market. Those built in the city center by the Urban Redevelopment Department (after 1974, the Urban Redevelopment Authority) were sometimes integrated into their car parks, public housing, and even commercial centers. The Public Works Department built hawker centers in private suburbs or as part of parks and gardens that served recreational crowds rather than residents or workers. These centers offered the population affordable meals and emancipated women from the kitchen so they could join the workforce (at least in theory), suggesting the ways that architectural design was an integral part of the PAP's social engineering of Singapore (p. 239). Today, the hawker center has become not just a part of everyday life but a symbol of national culture, as indicated by the controversial nomination of Singapore's "hawker culture" to UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status in 2020.<sup>1)</sup>

---

1) It is, in fact, a cultural heritage Singapore shares with Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries.

While *Everyday Modernism* offers scholars of the built environment an excellent overview of the complex intertwined histories of Singapore's developmental state and its modernist urban landscape, the story that it seeks to tell is sometimes encumbered by an excessive invocation of comparative theoretical paradigms. These comparisons often obfuscate what the authors mean by "everyday modernism" in the first place. In particular, the attempt at accommodating contemporary theories of architecture and its social uses in the introduction seems an unnecessary exercise in theoretical acrobatics. For example, the fact that buildings are used after they are built seems a universally understood truth that does not require further explication by contemporary scholars working on European and African architecture (p. 55). Furthermore, given Chang's own pioneering research in techno-scientific histories of tropical architecture, it seems odd that there is little treatment in the book of the thermal values and energy usage implicit in modernist building projects in Southeast Asia, where air conditioning has been an integral part of building design. However, what will become clear to readers who stick with the book's fascinating case studies, archival images, and contemporary photographs is that "everyday modernism" moves away from high-profile, single-authored design precedents to illuminate those buildings that have been neglected by the historical record, whether because they were deemed too quotidian or because they lacked "conventional design authorship."

While not exhaustive, the study is comprehensive and inspiring. Many briefly mentioned sites—like the Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng columbarium, which looks like a "condo for the dead" (pp. 268, 271)—are worthy of further study in their own right. *Everyday Modernism* is a welcome addition to studies of housing and should be required reading in any course on the history of post-World War II modernist architecture and urban planning. It brings to conventional histories of modernism a deeper understanding of the relationships between citizen-formation and design and rewards patient readers with a history of modernist architecture's continued and contradictory legacies in Southeast Asia.

Lawrence Chua 蔡明亮

*School of Architecture, Syracuse University*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3098-7064>