

Thames
&Hudson



Mok Wei Wei: Works by W Architects

Mok Wei Wei, Edited by Justin Zhuang, With essays by Jiat-Hwee Chang and Leon van Schaik

The first monograph on Mok Wei Wei, Singapore's most inventive, thoughtful and respected architect

594 illustrations

26.0 x 22.0cm

352pp

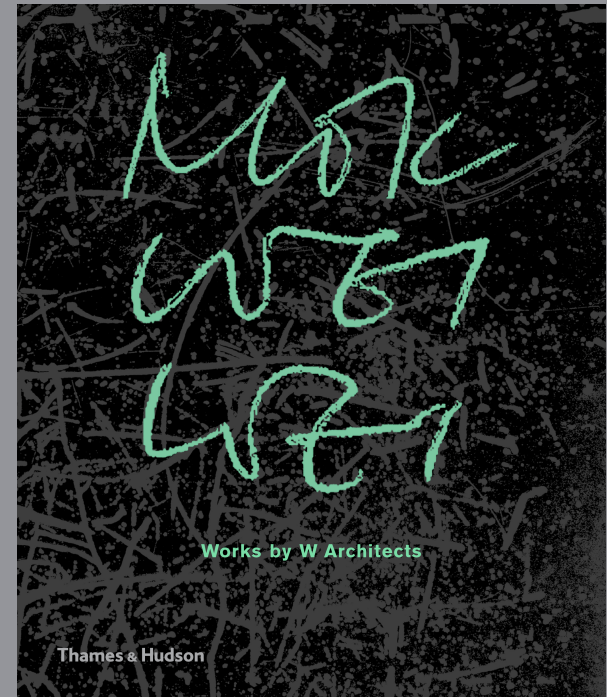
ISBN 9780500343456

BIC Individual architects & architectural firms

Paperback

£45

January 2021

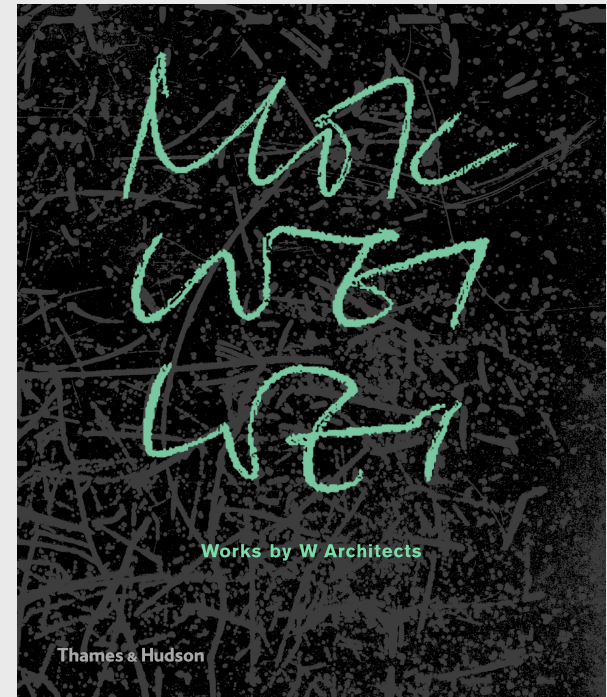


A4

Book

Key Sales Points

- Covers the full span of Mok Wei Wei's career, from his first Frank Gehry-inspired experiments to his highly innovative green apartment buildings and private residences.
- Produced in close collaboration with the architect, who contributes several essays that articulate his key ideas for the first time.
- Singapore, one of the world's most dynamic and evolving cities and architecture scenes, provides the backdrop for most of the featured work, making the book as much a survey on the rich possibilities of tropical architecture as a monograph.





THE NASSIM

2006–2015

This was our third up-market housing project in Nassim Hill, one of the most exclusive residential addresses in Singapore. It sits between our work on *The Loft* (2002) and *Tanglin Residences* (2005). All three developments were restricted by height control, a prescription by the planning authorities to protect important vistas from within the nearby Singapore Botanic Gardens.

In addition to the low-rise scale, the developer's brief took inspiration from early 20th century black and white bungalows. Such housing was popular with the Europeans who stayed here amongst their spice plantations during the British colonial era. They are characterised by lush greenery with wide verandas on their frontages, and are named after their painted black and white façades, which echo the "mock" Tudor-style houses of the Victorian era.

Our design captures the essence of such bungalows while offering the facilities of a modern condominium. Instead of mimicking their look, a key feature of all 55 apartments is an expansive balcony that extends the living and dining areas to create covered spaces for social gatherings. This references the black and white bungalow's generous verandas, which maximised cross ventilation to offer the coolest part of the home for families to spend time in.

The apartments are housed within eight blocks that surround a landscaped pool area. For the first to third levels of these five-storey blocks, the veranda spaces on the façade are expressed

as a series of terraces that are linked by landscaped bridges. These horizontal decks slide beyond the footprint of the residential blocks to blur the boundaries and building forms. They also enhance the saleable areas as planning regulations then exempted open-to-sky terraces from the allowable Gross Floor Area calculation. Perched above the landscape decks are units on the fourth and fifth storeys that resemble houses. This massing is enhanced by pitched roofs that conceal the attics of the top floor apartments. Slatted sliding-folding screens cover their verandas, a reinterpretation of the traditional timber-louved French windows used in black and white bungalows.

A variety of units are offered in this development, ranging from three-bedroom apartments to five-bedroom duplexes. The larger units also feature private lift lobbies that let residents bypass the social spaces of their apartments and head straight into their private areas. The most exclusive units are the seven penthouses. One even comes with a dedicated lift, a rooftop pool and parking for seven cars — offering the best of both landed housing and apartment living.

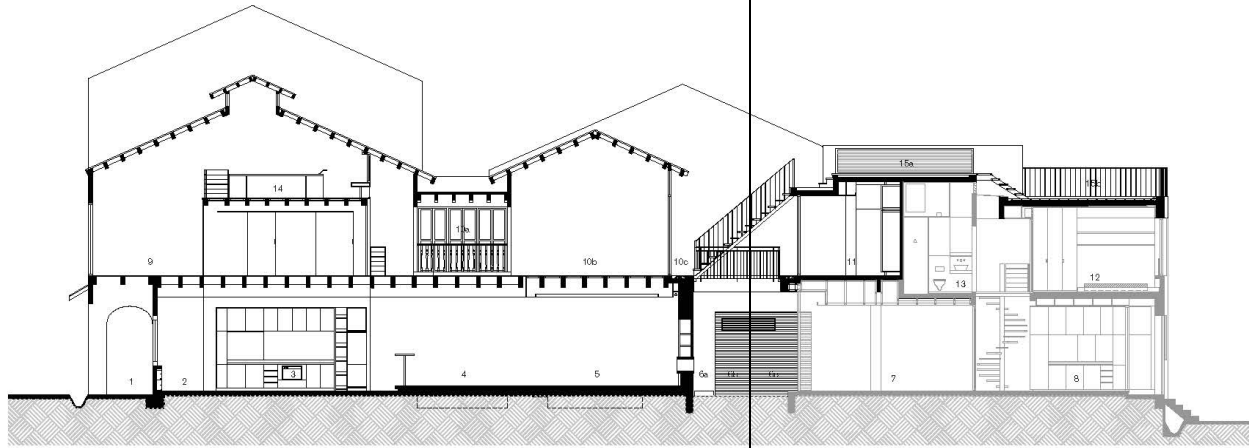


01 OPPOSITE Terraces linked by landscaped bridges.

02 Entrance porch to the development.

03 OVERLEAF To reduce the scale of the 5-storey development, the first to third storey façades are expressed as interconnected landscaped terraces, and the fourth and fifth levels are expressed as 'houses' perched on these landscaped decks.





Section AA

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------|----|------------------------|
| 1 | Five foot way | 9 | Master bedroom |
| 2 | Foyer | 10 | Living and Terrace |
| 3 | Kitchen | 11 | Guest Room |
| 4 | Decorative pond | 12 | Master bedroom (annex) |
| 5 | Sunken dining | 13 | Bathroom |
| 6 | Courtyard | 14 | Attic study |
| 7 | Living (annex) | 15 | Roof terrace |
| 8 | Kitchen/dining (annex) | | |





01

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

2002–2006

First developed as the Raffles Museum and Library by the British in 1887, this institution at the foot of Fort Canning Hill has been expanded several times alongside Singapore's historical development. In 2003, this national monument underwent a three-year long refurbishment, including the addition of a new wing, as part of efforts to transform Singapore into a cultural destination.

We were brought on to the project when construction was about to start on an original scheme by CPG Consultants. This meant working within constraints, including the decision to house most of the programme underground as well as keeping key elements such as having a physical marker at the corner of the new wing. As the museum sits between two major historical green spaces – Bras Basah Park and Fort Canning Hill – we envisioned it as an

urban corridor to them both. This meant creating an architectural expression that would connect the two as well as the new with the old. Our approach was less about a formal intervention. Instead, we sought to create a series of spaces that let visitors experience the movement of time as they walk between the museum's Neo-Palladian architecture and its new glass-and-aluminium extension.



03



02

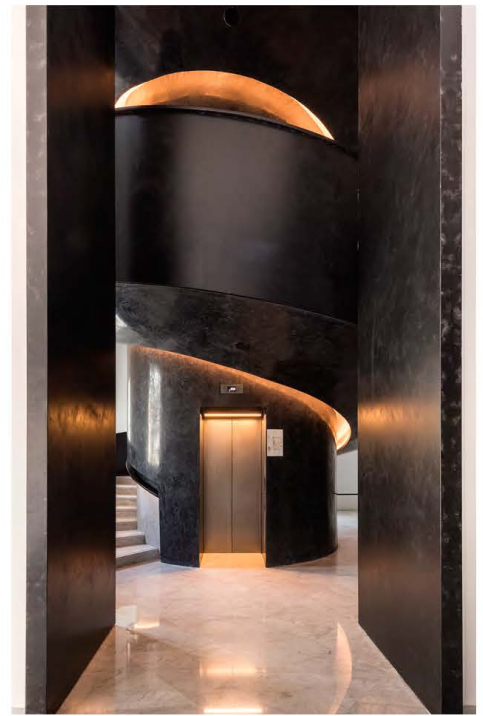
01 & 03 A glass connector cuts through the original tiled roof, from which the old whale bones were suspended, enabling the dome over the entrance rotunda to be viewed up close.
02 Urban Corridor Study Sketch by Nui Rabwat.



Victoria Theatre

By removing the 1950s renovation and inserting a completely new auditorium, we continued the conversation between past and present started in the atrium. As visitors travel from the concert hall's original neoclassical façade in the atrium and past the new historically-inspired wall across, they encounter the exterior of the theatre's auditorium. Flat and devoid of any decorations, this is clad in large, black Glass Reinforced Concrete (GRC) panels and bookends a transition from restoration to intervention.

We struggled with the interior of the theatre, choosing between referencing its original Edwardian design and creating a completely new space. Neither seemed satisfactory. There were not enough records available to work on the former and carrying out the latter would not reflect the theatre's place in the community. While the 1950s interior of the theatre was unremarkable, it had about 1,000 chairs made out of components that were quaint and unique for their time. These British creations were recycled for our modern but scaled down 614-seat auditorium. The old chairs' small cast iron and aluminium connectors — one kidney-shape, the other U-shape — were used as datum lines on the auditorium walls. Following the profiles of these components, solid timbers were extruded and fixed to the recycled parts to form a screen that performed acoustic functions. The chairs' backrests became cladding for a new structure on the second-storey foyer, which houses the music rehearsal rooms. With their original seat numbers kept intact and their timber surfaces left unrestored, this floating Rubik's cube of chairs will hopefully bring back memories for a generation that grew up using the theatre.



14

13 OPPOSITE The layering of the construction - the historic facade of Victoria Concert Hall (right), the reinterpreted pre-cast panelled wall of Victoria Theatre (centre) and the new GRC panel wall of the theatre auditorium (left).

14 New spiral staircase of the theatre.



The two Singaporeans span a generation but also a cultural divide. William educated in Cantonese and Chinese; Wei Wei, unusually for a Singaporean, in Chinese. Their business lives have been conducted in English, though Wei Wei spoke Chinese at home, and William English. Completely ordinarily, although of Anglo-Dutch extraction, my life has been lived in English. Wei Wei's educational geography, while linguistically complex, was unitary: Singapore bounded his primary, secondary and tertiary experience. William's education had a lateral geography, stretching from Hong Kong to Singapore and on to the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London and subsequently to postgraduate study at Harvard. My educational trajectory was longitudinal, early days in the southern hemisphere, secondary and tertiary in England with postgraduate study in the south and then the north again.

What caused these variously complicated life pathways? All were set in motion by the slow expansion across the globe of European trade and technology. For all three of us, the major parts of our lives have been lived in an emergent "post-colonial" era, one that in its current phase has China resurgent on the world stage. This situates all of us in a flux of culture between East and West, and in particular places: Wei Wei pivoting from the fulcrum of Singapore, an island city-state that refracts all the cultures on the East-West continuum.

Threaded through any understanding of the condition of being in the world in these times are concepts of modernism, some western, some eastern. The former tends to emphasise the individual as a focus of development and they tend to the normalisation of individual rights, the latter have a collective advancement ethos accepting a range of differences in the concept of rights and duties within a collective. These poles have preoccupied thinkers for 150 years: in the late 19th century and early 20th the novelist Joseph Conrad — whose geography spanned the full range of ours (and more) — argued that what the west called "civilisation" was in fact merely "material interest", an excuse for ruthless and savage exploitation, whereas, in "the orient": "in three hundred miles beyond the telegraph cables and mail lines' you could find a sort of honest authenticity that the west had long since abandoned."³ Conrad looked at the actions of his compatriots with clear eyes, a critic of modernity as a rapacious economic system.

By contrast, architecture as a profession has been normalised through a vision of modernism

as a universal condition supported by a language, accessible to all, providing for all. Cultural differences were papered over as irrelevances. The fault lines in this early to mid-twentieth century project were revealed in the two great European wars. Post Modernism reasserted the cultural but did not eschew the metropolitan centralism of the imperial construct. The individual as creator straddled this convention, despite the fact that architectural practice is necessarily a collective enterprise. As an individual, Wei Wei commenced his practitioner life working at first for William and soon in partnership with him. William Lim Associates (WLA) became W Architects and from this firm William eventually retired.

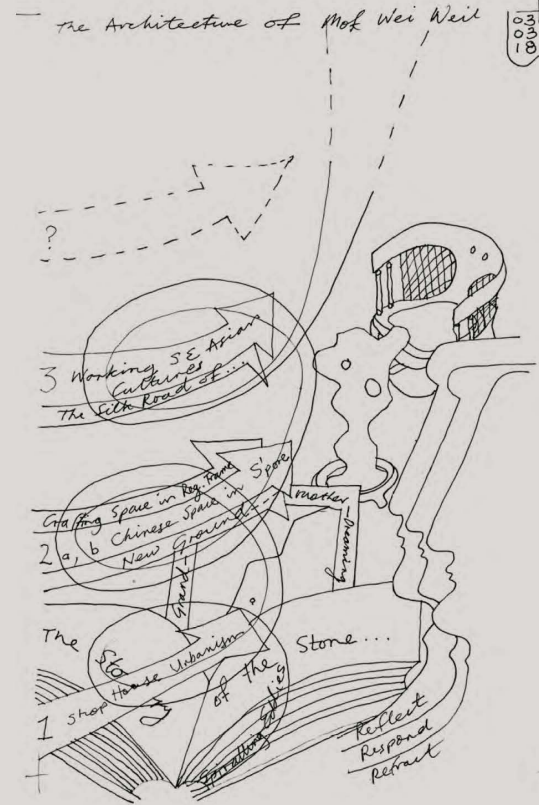
If we take the geography of the imagination into account, as I believe we must, there are necessarily two ways of locating these Singapore-based activities. They intertwine. One is to understand the history of the individual, while the other is to capture the relationships of the individuals with the various collectives that they have come from and do now inhabit. How does a return to the belief that architects are creatures of their personal histories as much as if not more than of their incultured ideologies impact on the way that practice is seen today? In a sense we return to the foundations of western modernism. Conrad argued that people arrive at understandings through observation and experience over a long period, that it takes time before patterns that lurk below surfaces can be discerned. William Pater, the English theorist who paved the way for the modernist, stream-of-consciousness works of Proust and James Joyce, basing his thinking on the latest scientific findings, argued that "our physical lives are made up of processes and elemental forces in perpetual motion 'renewed from moment to moment but parting sooner or later on their ways'. In the mind 'the whirlpool is still more rapid', a drift of perceptions, feelings, thoughts and memories, reduced to impressions 'unstable, flickering, inconstant', ringed around for each of us by that thick wall of personality".

It is in sympathy with this perception that I here focus on the literal standing points of the protagonists, all "weaving and un-weaving" themselves in a world of global influences, well adrift in the nineteenth century; and now, in the twenty-first, impelled by the technologies of the information age. Indeed, at Wei Wei's initial review of the works of the practice it became clear that Wei Wei's early interest in Chinese space and identity and in S.E. Asian indigenous cultures, recurred time and again in subsequent

works. For example, exploring Chinese spaces in *Morley Road House* in the mid 90s, and *Beijing House* in the mid 2000 — interests later overlaid with an involvement in the colonial legacy through the refurbishment of neoclassical monuments. These concerns spiral through the works in counterpoint to the periods of development.

In Wei Wei's case the "weaving" has been sometimes in isolation, always in counterpoint to collectives. His old friend Richard Ho became very much involved in the Rationalism of Aldo Rossi. Wei Wei avoided this, and also avoided to the locally dominant "tropical architecture" agenda with its emphasis on climate-responsive designs, now morphed into "sustainability design". Wei Wei writes: "This 'tropical architecture' narrative has dominated the Singapore discourse (as well as many post colonial countries) since the 50s. I think the unique (contra) position we take is worth emphasizing."

More recent thinking sees modernity as the (desperate) attempt to reconcile time as it is lived, one lifetime at a time, and cosmic time — the almost unimaginable *durée* that our individual lives nest within. Our broiling, information-age culture permeates newness, being *avant-garde*, being young or "emergent" — new on the scene. Thus those of us who are past middle-age face being examined as the producers of "late-work"⁴, of coming after our early selves, after the new kids on the block. But urgent and febrile as the pulsing of newness is, it nests, as observed above, within sweeping panoramas of time. Recently, after some decades of intellectual emphasis on forensic analysis of specific situations, panoramic histories such as that of Arnold Toynbee's 'A Study of History' (OUP 1960) have become respectable again. Frankopan⁵ and Cohen⁶ are re-awakening our awareness of the cultural continuum that stretches along the Silk Road, revealing how ideas and technologies have travelled along it in both directions for the duration of our five-thousand-year old civilisation. Cohen argues that literature begins in Sumeria and Egypt and that as it passes along the Silk Road it spawns waves of literature in the east and the west. There are similar tides of influence in architecture, the technologies and the ideas spreading along the trade routes — as I discovered when encountering the unusual hipped transept in the cathedral at Orceval as a young man. This architectural idea floods mysteriously the crossing of the church with light from a height not expected to be there. And the idea can be tracked back along trade routes through the Mediterranean to Byzantium and Persia.



³ Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 147-148.

⁴ Joe Paul Kroll, "Sorry they're late: Modernism's permanent state of being 'after'" *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5 January 2018, 12-13.

⁵ Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶ Ben Hutchinson, "Empire imposes epic: The global influences on the development of literature in Europe" *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 January 2018, 24-25.

1990

**Peter Kor Studio,
Scotts Shopping Centre,
Singapore**

The beginning of many boutiques involving the creation of a shop identity that reflected the fashion designer's style. The minimalism of Peter Kor's designs was reflected in our neo-Modernist interiors, which was also beginning to emerge internationally, for example, David Chipperfield's Issey Miyake shop in London.



05

1990

**MIX,
La Meridien Shopping Arcade,
Singapore**

A unique shop design that embodied the innovative retail concept of a T-shirt shop, which featured a few basic styles in a rich variety of colours and materials.

Six back-lit easels featuring the T-shirt styles are arranged symmetrically and set amidst the warm hued 'box' of the shop. Finished in varying textures of brown cement render, this created an atmosphere that was sleek and yet inviting at the same time.

This was given a full feature in The Straits Times, which rarely featured design articles at that time.



06

1990

**Anne Klein II,
La Meridien Shopping Arcade,
Singapore**

Designed at around the same time as MIX for an international brand.



07

1990 – 1991

**Man & His Woman,
La Meridien Shopping Arcade,
Singapore**

The flagship store of a multi-label boutique that carried imported international fashion brands. Notwithstanding its international content, we decided to inject a regional feel to the shop by incorporating traditional Southeast Asian materials, for example, the Sarawakan mat that adorned the ceiling of the shop.



08

1991 – 1992

**Singapore Apparel Centre,
Park Mall,
Singapore**

Our efforts in creating shop identities for fashion labels culminated in the design of a departmental store that was set up to promote local fashion labels.

However, in the context of a departmental store that was filled with merchandise, we learnt that it was difficult to project a coherent identity.

1991 – 1993

**Lem's House I,
82 Jalan Geylang,
Singapore**

Our first neo-modernist house. The building appears somewhat heavy but the spaces are light and porous.

This was made possible by the use of folding partitions that opened up the indoor spaces to the outdoors, and by interweaving planting throughout the 1st storey.



09

1992

**Esta,
Parkmall,
Singapore**

Another boutique where we used Southeast Asian artefacts – in this case traditional timber loom parts from Madura, Indonesia – to create a shop identity. The designer, Esther Tay, specialised in the modern interpretation of traditional clothes.



10

1992 – 1994

**42 Club Street Townhouse,
Singapore**

1992 – 1994

**Crowhurst Drive House,
16 Crowhurst Drive,
Singapore**

1992 – 1994

**18 Blair Road Townhouse,
Singapore**

A townhouse renovation where we introduced a tiered garden in the open to sky courtyard, which separated the conserved house and the new build at the rear.



1993 – 1994

**Nanyang Development Guide Plan,
Singapore**

In the 90s, the Government created a series of Detailed Guide Plans to supplement the Master Plan. Many of these were tendered out to the private sector.

In our proposal for the Nanyang Development Guide Plan, a town centre was created that not only enhanced its facilities, but also built upon the existing cultural assets; in this case, the dragon kilns that were used for making traditional pottery.

1994 – 1999

**Balam Road Public Housing Upgrading,
Mapherson Estate,
Singapore**

In the 90s, the Government embarked on an upgrading programme for the older public housing estates. In this proposal, besides meeting the standard provisions, we attempted to give the old HDB flats a new look. This was done by extending and augmenting the simple modernist facades of the old flats without resorting to the addition of ornaments to impart an identity. This was in keeping with our approach of respecting designs that reflected the conditions of their time, without erasing them in the process of upgrading.



11