

COMMENTARY

Landscaping Trends in Singapore: A Commentary on Award Winning Projects

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Complexity of Biodiversity Conservation

Singapore's reputation as a City in a Garden is a result of the joint efforts by landscape practitioners, from planners, designers to managers. Two major awards that recognize outstanding works in the landscape industry are the Singapore Landscape Architecture Awards (SLAA) and Landscape Industry Association of Singapore (LIAS) Awards of Excellence. While there are different categories with different sets of requirements in both awards, simply put, SLAA is a landscape architecture award to recognise the good design and planning works of a landscape architect, and LIAS awards is to recognise the good implemented works by landscape contractors. In 2019, I had the privilege to be invited as the jury for SLAA and the chief judge for the LIAS Awards. This article aims to illustrate some of my observations on the common trends and thoughts of the local landscape industry in the era of biophilia movement and mitigating climate change.

What is the current standard in Singapore's landscape industry? The pervasive greenery that we see today are the collective efforts of upstream policies and planning from respective government authorities to the design and implementation by appointed landscape consultancy firms and contractors. Each segment of the value chain plays an important role. Landscape architects under the accreditation of the Singapore Institute of Landscape Architects (SILA) focus on the quality

of design and its design management, whilst landscape implementers under the recognition of LIAS focus on the quality of plants sourcing, implementation and site management.

With the increasing awareness of biophilic design and focus in Singapore, we began to detect emerging and common trends in this city of greenery. In most projects we could see the diversity of plants species introduced in both public and private sectors, giving a far richer, lush and connected greenery experience for users. The following discusses winning projects in both SLAA and LIAS Awards, and how the design intent and quality of implementation are demonstrated.

More native plant species in support for biodiversity are observed, recognising the importance of urban ecology in our dense urban city. Moving across the scale and categories of projects, boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces become blurred as we see more and more vertical greenery, rooftop greenery and pocket greenery introduced in less definitive indoor and semi-outdoor spaces like roof decks, courtyards, skywell, well-lit office spaces and even climate-controlled environment.

Some of these larger spaces are further innovated for creative play, integrated and communal uses, embracing the notion of biophilia environment and diversified communities engagement in Singapore.

1. Dramatic experience of greenery in a climate-controlled environment
2. Brilliant and sensitive choice of planting palette and landscape solutions to overcome site challenges to create a series of gardens with lush and connected greenery experience



3. Intimate experience with greenery in an integrated urban development

4. Immersive experience with greenery in a constructed eco-system

5. Great quality and high standards of landscape implementation on a roof deck.

6. Choice of right plant species and creating a good condition for them to thrive

Value-chain in landscape

SLAA demonstrates the role of landscape architecture in the greening of buildings and open spaces. It involves horizontal space planning and design from parks to developments on varying levels from basement, grounds to decks. It is also responsible for the planting design to suit the context and site conditions, possibly including screening of services, subsoil drainage systems, green walls, green roofs to any design of landscape structures under the client's brief. This award looks at how well the landscape architect has successfully designed, integrated and managed the project to meet its objectives with the desired outcomes.

In addition, the judging of the award also extends beyond the aesthetics and the experience of the completed project. Jury panel tends to observe the fine details during on-site judging to ascertain evidence that objectives like biodiversity and good water management are met.

It is a fine line between what landscape architects specified and what landscape implementer value added to ensure the implemented landscape met its mark. During judging, the meticulous jury asked very specific questions about who did what and whether this is part of the design specifications or it is the initiative of the contractor to improve the quality of the project. In any case, when the project meets the quality standards and impresses the jury, both landscape architect and landscape contractor should share the joy of clinching the award.

In the LIAS award, the jury looks at a range of criteria for the implementation of landscape



works. Unless it is a small scale turnkey landscape project where design plays a significant part, most of the judging observations usually boil down to the quality of soil and plants species, suitability of the plants in the designed conditions, greening methods, maintenance, quality of the implemented works and its finishing. However, in order for a project to be recognised at a higher level of awards, the jury looks into the process and behind-the-scene management of the implementation contracts like pre-growth, acclimatisation, advance purchases, plant sourcing standards, site constraints, technicality challenges and any initiatives or value-added services on the part of the contractor. Very often, this behind-the-scene or so-called “the invisible part” of the implementation judging would only be known if the jury know to ask the right questions.

Sometimes many may wonder why a project gets a higher recognition in the LIAS award and a lower one in SLAA or vice versa. Therefore it is important to understand the distinction behind the two awards and what is being judged and assessed in the criteria. Design plays an important role in a project. A good quality implementation could also make a difference to the design. Consistent quality at both stages determines whether the project is a good one.

Landscape contractors are required to implement with good systems and processes. It should not be up to a foreign worker or rookie landscape architect to make decisions that

determine the quality of implementation and supervision on site. How or when a tree is staked should be embedded in a company’s process and methodology for landscape implementation.

Getting the basics right, then making advances as new basics

As Singapore evolves from a Garden City into a biophilic City in a Garden, it is important that every landscape firm and individual proudly owns this reputation and maintains the high standards we have set for ourselves. The landscape industry should know the standards of composting, mulching, growing medium, the right species for the right conditions, good quality tree selection, requirement for any pre-growth, acclimatisation for specially imported species, staking of trees, the maintenance regime required for the right planting palette, the drainage requirement and treatment of bioswales and other fundamental Active, Beautiful, Clean (ABC) water features. All the basic technical details and requirements should be executed with high competency. Getting these basics right are essential. So that we can be competent to make advances in new areas and face new challenges. As a result of climate change, there will be many uncertainties in our climatic and landscape environment. The landscape industry is required to be adaptable, innovative and resilient in meeting the demands of our changing environment. Even previous standards set may need to be reviewed regularly and improvised, if necessary.

We could see public agencies and landscape architects leading the social and environmental resilience building initiatives in many public projects of SLAA. We should continue to push this awareness and good design outcomes as an industry, and extend the influence into the realm of private projects with developers. Condominiums, private residential, hotels and institutions should start embracing their individual plots as biodiversity havens to support Singapore as collective patches to build biodiversity resilience. Appropriate plant species should be selected and the right biodiversity objectives should be observed, applied and executed from design to implementation and followed through in maintenance and monitoring. Principles of climate, ecological and social resilience need to be applied in most projects as much as possible. Knowledge of resilient design does not stop at design stages. It requires the implementers to understand the rationale and evidential approach to the resilient design, so that they could value-add during the implementation stage.

International perspectives

I was asked a question by a LIAS member on whether our current works are of international standards. Rather than giving a direct yes or no, I would like to share some of my perspective and interesting observations from my involvement in several international judging engagement in Asia Pacific over the years.

In China, I came across landscape contractors who developed their own construction theory on “ecological intelligence” based on Confucius studies and religious beliefs, taking responsibility in sustainable sourcing and on-site waste management to material reduction that added

values to the project. There were contractors who went on study trips to Harvard University to understand the ecological management and implementation for large scale projects and applied their knowledge in the wetland systems of public parks. In another example of an ecological project in Shaanxi Province, the landscape contractor had to improve the condition of a barren site previously used for mining. They took on their own environment analysis to understand the altitude, precipitation, temperature, slope gradient, soil and vegetation cover before proposing different options against cost and time requirements.

In Australia most landscape contractors have systems and processes in place when it comes to planting and transplanting. They have established best practices of how a tree is to be staked and methods to test a good establishment of a young tree.

In Japan, the systematic approach to pruning and maintenance from in holding nursery to post site planting also demonstrated the standards they maintained for landscape implementation. This further illustrated how Japanese treats landscape as a skilled craft with high level of finesse.

There are many more other shining examples around the region that deserve a serious look, to uncover and the tremendous efforts behind various landscape companies.

So, as a landscape professional myself, I pose this question to the landscape industry, both SILA and LIAS. “Have we come to a point as a landscape industry where landscape architects and landscape implementers are aware and confident of one another’s’ standards? And how do we work together to establish a Singapore ‘biophilia standard’?” Probably something to think about. 

