

NATURE'S KEEPERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY STEED

Interview by Gwendy Tan
Images courtesy of Henry Steed



Henry Steed is one of the partners of ICN Design, a landscape architecture firm that has designed extensive landscapes as far as the Middle East, China, India and Australia. Mainly specialising in tropical climates, they are also responsible for the landscapes created for key landmarks in Singapore today, such as the Esplanade Roof Garden, Sentosa Nature Discovery and its Imbiah terraces, Singapore History Museum, and the iconic Waterboat House.

ICN first began as the "Integrated Consulting Network", a group of affiliated companies started by ex-Design Directors of Landscape and Environmental firm Aspinwall Clouston, after the latter was taken over in 1998. These directors from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia had, after leaving ACLA, formed small companies in their home bases. Though operating independently, these companies established contact with one another and collaborated on various projects. In 2004, ICN Design International was formed.

After a few internal changes over the years, ICN Design International is now an independent Singaporean company with international affiliations. The company is headed by Henry Steed and Terrence Fernando.

CG: WHAT IS THE PHILOSOPHY OF YOUR FIRM?

HS: ICN is all about Landscape. In a world dominated by the rush to build more and more, bigger and bigger, the natural environment is being pushed back relentlessly. Although there is much talk about Greening and the Garden City, when it comes to the statistical need for growth demanded by economics, planning and engineering, the green is the first to go.

ICN is in the vanguard of those dedicated to stem this tide of concrete and asphalt, and to work to ensure that we do not lose our contact with Mother Nature, on whom we depend totally on, but choose to ignore and even destroy most of the time.

Nature is primeval and fundamental, founded on bedrock, soil, vegetation, air and water. We and all other living creatures depend on these for our survival. We are motivated to green every little corner possible, and to plant trees wherever a tree may grow. We seek to model projects to conserve the earth's natural terrain, and educate against the belief that we can replace the ground beneath our feet with a minimised, artificial land perched on structures.

Firstly, we are stewards of the land; second, conservers of the natural environment; third, educators of the arithmetic and statistical professions; fourth, makers of fundamental landscapes; and lastly, decorators.

We call our task "Integrated Environmental Design", which means we must attend to and coordinate every aspect of the environ-

ment outside buildings, and ensure that the end result is of the highest possible order.

CG: WHAT DO YOU THINK THE PROFESSION OF A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT IS LIKE AS A WHOLE, IN SINGAPORE?

HS: The profession of Landscape Architecture is still very raw in Singapore. The Singapore Institute of Landscape Architects was only founded in the early 1980s, and membership still remains small. Although there are 19 Landscape Architect companies, 3 government departments with Landscape Architects and over 100 members, the proportion of Landscape Architects to the overall population is tiny.

Only in 2007 was the first full-time Landscape course at NUS started. Thus, a mere fraction of Landscape Architects are trained in Singapore; almost all today have been trained overseas. We have a long way to go. We are not recognised by the Government as Qualified Persons, and thus cannot submit our Landscape Schemes to the Government. In order to qualify, we have to have a far more stringent system of educational and professional qualifications, a significant record of experience, continuing professional development, and proof that Landscape Architects are worthy of the title Qualified Persons.

Strangely, although Singapore has given the Landscape Architect a huge amount of work over the last thirty years, there have been little generated initiatives internally to upgrade his professional status or turn the landscaping association into one of the essential professional bodies in Singapore's design community.

It seems that we are so busy that we have little time for professional development.

CG: WHICH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT/WORKS DO YOU RESPECT MOST, AND WHY?

HS: There are many very good Landscape Architects around the world, and so many command respect and admiration. Personally, I find it difficult to get hooked on any one person's work above another. I have however, been hugely influenced by several major figures.

Whilst at college, I had several tutoring sessions with Geoffrey Jellicoe, whom apart from being a wonderful person, seemed to encapsulate my vision of what a Landscape Architect should be—a designer from the ground up who

CG: CITYGREEN
HS: Henry Steed

LEFT One North Park Terraces.

BOTTOM Flyer Forest and Pool.





covered all realms in the external environment, a spatial thinker and someone who saw plants as a totally vital medium.

Roberto Burle Marx was the hero of us students with his consummate plantsmanship and artistic flair. I was lucky to have met him shortly before he died, and we went round Singapore Botanic Gardens, where he proved he knew more Asian plants than I did. What a delightful man! Sadly, I couldn't take up his offer to visit him in Brazil.



More recently, I am impressed by both the big thinking and the minute attention to detail, of Kathryn Gustafson, with whom I have worked with, on Gardens by the Bay in Marina East. Kathryn is hugely influential. We need influential Landscape Architects.

I am also looking forward to Andrew Grant, the designer of Gardens by the Bay in Marina South, becoming one of the giants of landscape architecture. We also need giants.



CG: WHAT ARE THE TOP SKILLS EVERY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT SHOULD POSSESS?

HS: This is a subject that cannot be described in a sentence. Indeed, I am thinking of writing a book on the subject of what the future Landscape Architect needs to be able to do. This is going to require a very broad layering of skills, far more than appears to be the case today, where Landscape Architects are perceived as decorators.

As stewards of the land, we must understand the land and its eco-systems, its geology, climate, natural patterns of drainage and vegetation, the fauna and micro flora, the human impact and the workings of all the inter-relationships that emerge from these.

As conservers of the natural environment, we need to be able to explain to the decision makers why the environment and natural systems are so important, and why we must not tear everything apart to do what they perceive to be necessary. We must be able to persuade them to put in the resources to achieve the optimum goals.

As educators, we must teach our co-professionals about how this all fits into their often inflexible plans.

As designers, we must take all of the above and turn this into coherent and workable funda-



mental "bedrock" landscapes.

As landscape designers, we must take the fundamentals, make them look good and work well, so that people may enjoy the new landscapes and the creatures of nature may thrive in them too.

Only then, can we consider that we have achieved an "Integrated Environmental Design", and can be professionals who are recognised and respected as Landscape Architects.

CG: IDEALLY, HOW SHOULD LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE INTEGRATE ITSELF WITH ARCHITECTURE?

HS: In today's world, Architecture dominates in the process of urban planning and design. In many ways, the Architect is the coordinator of all the myriad aspects of the built environment. Design for buildings as aesthetic objects is only a part of the story.

Along with Civil and Structural Engineering, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, Façade Design, Security Design, Interior Design, Operations and Management of buildings, Landscape is only one component. Unlike many of the others, Landscape is perhaps the most visible, and is often the key element featured in the marketing of buildings.

Landscape Architects thus have to begin their involvement very early on in the process, to ensure that all of the requirements of structures and servicing of buildings can be woven into the overall fabric, and secured in the designs all through the design and construction process.

For example, to build a planter on a roof, we would need to determine the appropriate size and depth of the planter right at the beginning, and make sure it can be accommodated in the structure, does not interfere with services, able to be drained and remain water-tight, and will allow plants, possibly trees, to grow for decades to come.

CG: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESIGNING LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN SINGAPORE/ ASIA AND OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD?

HS: We have designed landscapes all the way from Egypt, Beijing, India to Australia. There are vast differences between them all. Although we find many plants we use in Singapore in other

zones, they are growing under different conditions. There will always be a lot of plants you don't know about, and rapid assimilation is essential.

Each place you go to needs to be learned. All those things I've mentioned previously, requires to be fully understood. Most tricky is the human element, because people from different places deal with their environments differently. Cultural as well as ecological and horticultural aspects need to be studied, researched and understood. Soils, climate and plant materials need to be learned and catalogued as fast as possible, as nothing is worse than your landscape dying off because you selected the wrong materials.

CG: WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE ISSUES TODAY?

HS: Very soon, these will become the most important issues of all. Globally, money drives everything including almost all Government policies. When climate change really hits home, and the ground beneath our feet begins to move, food starts to run out because we have abused the insects that pollinate plants, and water becomes insufficient for our needs because we have damaged the natural systems that provide us with water. Money can only be used then to put off the evil hour.

Most people, including top decision-makers, refuse to accept that this could happen, and blithely proceed to try and shovel nature into a corner while continuing to expand without a care. Nature cannot be shovelled. Try asking a tsunami or typhoon victim about the power of nature.

With financial crises trying to tell us something—which we also happily ignore—and the melting of the ice caps, we are going to have to apply the brakes at some point soon.

CG: WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE FUTURE FOR SINGAPORE AS A "GARDEN CITY"?

HS: The "Garden City" is an outdated concept born out of a desperate solution to the ghastly urban conditions at the end of the 19th century. Even "City in a Garden" is a twee expression to say that our concrete jungle has some gardens in it.

The future must be the integration of natural ecosystems into our urban environment; our catchphrase should be "Nature in our City", or

perhaps "Naturally Singapore". This does not equate to pretending to put tokens of nature onto our rooftops, whilst permanently sterilising the ground under buildings, but the reorganising of our spatial planning and reassessment of land values against the value of natural, quality environments that will assure the health and productivity of the whole community.

Value is not only about money. In today's money-obsessed culture, that is going to be the hardest message to get across.

CG: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES OR OBSTACLES YOU FACE AS A LANDSCAPE DESIGNER TODAY?

HS: I think I have covered this one in the various points above. It's always been a long hard journey to move things along, and get people to accept the essential needs set out above. That journey will continue long after I have gone, and I try to find good people to take the baton and never stop despite the hazards, pitfalls and hurdles.

CG: HAVING WON THE GOLD AWARD FOR THE PHILOSOPHER'S SEAT, COULD YOU SHARE WITH US YOUR CORE DESIGN SENSIBILITIES OF THAT PROJECT?

HS: This was an attempt to show the vital need for us to commune with and understand nature, and to bring nature close into our lives. We all seem to be scared of nature. We concrete our yards to ensure that there are no bugs. Yet we know little about her.

We ignore the blessings of the humble bee, which is responsible for pollinating the grains that make our daily bread. Every time we fog the suburbs, we kill everything, including the bees. The idea of the Philosopher sitting in the wasteland at the edge of the city, whilst contemplating the future, is what I want everyone to be able to do. It was wonderful to get people to go and climb through the reeds and sit on the Philosopher's Seat, and look back at the "City". They were so happy.

It's in all of us. Our ancestors came in from the fields. They understood nature, because nature controlled their lives. We have to bring it all back, and learn to embrace Mother Nature. Because she is our Mother and somehow we seem to have forgotten that.

CG: HAVING WORKED ON NUMEROUS LANDSCAPING PROJECTS, COULD YOU SHARE WITH US THE MOST MEMORABLE ONE?

HS: Actually, I love most of the landscapes I have done, although one or two are perhaps best forgotten. I loved the Sentosa Fountain Garden, but it has been demolished to make way for Resorts World. I did not love the Asian Village, and thankfully, that has also been demolished for Resorts World.

The whole area of the Imbiah Terraces, Imbiah Lookout and the Sentosa Nature Discovery are very close to my heart, and most people love them too.

This is what it's all about, when people really enjoy a place. These simple designs may not give you international recognition, but thousands of people use them every day, and find peace and happiness in these lush, romantic and tactile places.

I always say to my staff that no landscape is of any use until it's finished and people are using it. If they use it well and are happy there, then we have achieved our goal.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM
National Museum Frontage, Sentosa
Imbiah Terrace and Escalator,
Waterboat House Pier, Sentosa
Palawan Beach Hub.