

DREAM STOREYS

CLARA CHOW



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Dream Storeys
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Introduction

I was sitting in Toast Box in SAFRA Toa Payoh, lamenting to my friend Yen about how trapped and uninspired I felt, when the idea for this book happened.

An April afternoon: the sun trying to reach in through glass panels to touch and tan us with its hands. Yen and I had commandeered two dinky wooden tables, and were sitting diagonally across from each other. The tables, with their uneven legs, rocked when we leaned forward to make our points. I had just returned from an eight-day writing retreat in Iceland, my head full of notions of moving there for good to write novels in freezing farmhouses and listen to heavy metal in Reykjavik dives.

Looking back, I was uncomfortably trying to find my way home: back into the heat and crowds of city living, my body having arrived without incident at Changi Airport, my cosmic self lagging far behind. Feeling displaced, all I wanted to do was write down stuff I made up. In short bursts. Every day. Working up eventually to something bigger and more coherent.

“Let’s do a writing project together!” I tried to convince Yen. An architect, she told me that writing was not her *thang*, and that she’d much rather stick to designing buildings. I tried to convince her to design me an imaginary building, which I would then use as the setting for a short story.

She began telling me about a shopping centre she designed as a Master’s candidate at Columbia University in New York City, more than a decade ago. A shopping centre not meant to last. Without seeing her architectural drawings, I imagined a place built like a Rube Goldberg machine, destined to fall apart elaborately. A mall that self-destructed. I went home and wrote. A couple of days later, I sent the story to Yen. It was nothing like what she had

designed, but she didn't mind. That collaboration forms Chapter 1 of this book.

It struck me that I was onto something. I could ask architects about their dream buildings, and populate these buildings with fictional characters. The result would be a hybrid creature: a document of what Singapore could be, as well as a map of the imaginary. What of the buildings shelved (for now), the paths not taken? Would they have made this a different place, us a very different people?

In a nation that is obsessed with rebuilding and renewal, with running as fast as we can to stay in the same spot, places and spaces appear and disappear at a sometimes alarming rate. I wanted to amass a version of my country that exists only on paper.

For the next eight months, between July 2014 and March 2015, I interviewed Singapore architects—some famous and established; others just starting out in their careers. I sent e-mails to many in the field, explaining what the project was about, and asking them to speak to me. Thankfully, some of them did not laugh uproariously and press delete. Instead, they kindly agreed to talk to me, and our conversations inspired the stories that follow. Not every interview resulted in a story, unfortunately. But the cogs in my imagination were definitely oiled by each architect I met, listening to his or her vision of the fantastic for Singapore.

Needless to say, I ran into walls. One can take the girl out of Singapore, but can one ever take Singapore out of the girl? In writing these stories, I have worried over how my perspective as a Singaporean who has never lived anywhere else might be limiting my imagination as it lathers up an alternative to the country as it is today. I have fretted about OB markers—overt and internalised. At the end of the day, all I can hope for is a book that is a snapshot of a particular person writing in a particular country, at a particular time, resulting in a particular bridge or several approaches to our

Introduction

built environment—physical, socio-political, and cultural.

As the late American anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it: “Culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.” And in half a century, Singapore as a nation state has been engaged in the cultural work of telling its government-approved, as well as community-based, stories, to itself. The skyline tells a narrative, too: of hard work, sacrifice, prosperity, and progress; and of pragmatism, materialism, and collective amnesia. Depending on who is telling the story.

These, then, are the stories I tell myself.

Clara Chow
June 17, 2015

Chapter 1

Interview
Yen Yen Wu



Story
The Mall

Yen Yen Wu, Principal Architect
Genome Architects

What building would you build in Singapore, if there are no constraints of space, budget, physics, etc.?

A building that imagines, for a moment, that growing old is not a bad thing. A building that acknowledges that time passes; that all cells, like brick and mortar, cannot escape the passing of time and therefore matter.

We have been taught that buildings last forever. That is not true, but it seems so, because the life span of a building is often longer than that of a human being's. In our minds, we perpetuate this idea of eternity by preserving structures, painting the façade, forcing new programmes onto them, prolonging their use and purpose. Even though we know they are old, we pretend they are not.

We use the terms 'maintenance' and 'preservation' interchangeably to refer to both human beings and buildings. People assume that the appearance of timelessness is a good quality: a 'timeless' style, face or design. I'd like to debunk the theory that all things can and should be kept up. The word 'timeless' should be contested.

Perhaps, the best way to contest that would be with a shopping centre built to last for only a limited time. One that houses disposable material objects, while itself running out of time. My dream building has an accelerated rate of dying, through use by its inhabitants, giving it a life span parallel to a human's. In this way, it is a comment on how we perceive time and architecture.

Every time someone takes an item off the shelf, the floors will be scratched to expose the structure. Open the shelf doors often, and the floor upstairs starts to creak. It is not just the furniture or finishing that experiences wear and tear. The whole building is being demolished as it is being used.

Who do you envision living in and using your dream building?

Users of the building who can change the nature of the building. As they use and ‘interact’ with the building, they would also leave their mark on it—registering themselves physically in its history. Like one having an impact on a friend’s life. They would have a direct hand in its outcome. And if this leads to the building’s demise, then we strip death of taboo. We accept and celebrate the passing of time. To age gracefully, to know yourself better as time passes, is nothing to be afraid of.

How do you think your dream building will make Singapore or Singaporeans different if it existed?

We are a country with a short history. We are always trying to establish our identity, and figure out our achievements and legacy. As a society, we constantly obsess over the newest item on the market. Yet, we know these things are disposable and will not last forever.

Questioning the sanctity of old things or the need to record may cast a different perspective on how we view our own history.

Who are your favourite authors?

A.S. Byatt, Ayn Rand and William Gibson. I have made an effort to repeatedly read their novels.

What are your thoughts on the nature of collaboration — in terms of architecture, and also in a writing project like this one?

Architecture and architectural writing are very closely tied. It is a two-way street. Without the words, an architect would find it difficult to describe certain perceptions, experiences and designs before they come into existence. For example, without words, one cannot describe an “ethereal” cathedral, or express that a seat is “rough”.

How much ownership would you claim over a dream building that appears in, or shapeshifts, in one of these stories?

Fifty-fifty. Drawings and design descriptions lead to literary images and narratives. Yet, sometimes, what one conveys, in one medium, is different from what is received by another. A building description that translates into a story depends very much on the conveyor and the receiver.

The Mall

“It’s the mall’s last day, Ma,”

Jill sighed, exasperated, into the phone.

“I’ve got to stay ’til the end,” she added.

“Still standing?” screeched her mother on the other end of the line. “That mall? Good riddance to bad rubbish! You staying until it falls down around your ears? Haven’t had enough of its rotting insides?”

“Jason’s school called. There’s an outbreak of HFMD in his class. They found some spots on his tongue. Can you take a bus and go get him?”

Jill moved the phone receiver two inches away from her ear. The receiver continued to squawk. Idly, she tore a strip of laminate from the side of the counter she was sitting behind. Might as well really help the place along now.

Finally, her mother tired herself out. Jill put the phone back to her ear and heard her mother muttering: if she didn’t go and fetch Jason, who would? “You owe me cab fare and the doctor’s fee!” was her mother’s parting shot, before hanging up.

Jill glumly punched the cash register keys. Wires rigged to those keys somewhere in the magical bowels of the mall activated levers, wrenches, and pounding pestles, which mashed away at the building’s foundations. Tanglin Halt, where the mall sat like a toad in a valley, was pretty much waste land. Once upon a time, the buildings had been nice and new. There were factories and businesses, and people had jobs. Jill’s mum had been a yoga instructor in a studio nearby, catering to housewives and young career women in their Lululemon designer exercise gear.

Then, the recession hit, and people lost their jobs and stopped spending. Businesses went belly up. It was why the architecture firm that conceived of the disposable mall had

decided to locate it in Tanglin Halt: land in a ghost town could be picked up for a song. And should the building accidentally collapse due to deliberate neglect—or, as the firm put it, “creative non-sustainability”—there would be no neighbours to sue for collateral damage.

*

4pm: Jill had no idea what to do.

She had read in the papers that the disposable mall was hailed as a success in architectural digests. Beijing, Shanghai, and Seoul were already planning to build their own versions, with life spans between six months and two years. “Accelerated urban planning,” oozed *The Asian Wall Street Journal* in its skinny, black, Escrow font. “Exciting times for fast retail,” pronounced *The New York Times*. Landlords fell over themselves to praise the new trend, secretly rubbing their hands in glee at how much they would save on regular repairs. Fly-by-night construction firms high-fived themselves all the way to the bank, after tendering for contracts and cutting corners.

In central business districts, concerned citizens marched in protest over what they deemed wastage and erosion of collective memories of city-dwellers. “This is a deliberate creation of lacunae in people’s mental maps!” yelled one bespectacled, floppy-fringed intellectual interviewed on television. “Three years is enough to form an attachment, to send out synapses, with these malls! What are we going to do once it suddenly just caves in and disappears? Who would mend the holes in our psyches?” His friends had to restrain him, wild-eyed, from attacking the journalist on air.

Jill had no idea what all the complex-sounding social and aesthetic theories trotted out by the talking heads on TV meant. But she knew that she hated the mall. Resented it.

Wanted to kick its guts out for being so smelly and lousy. Splinters stuck out everywhere waiting to ambush her when she went to work. Flushing systems conked out forever in the public bathrooms. Garbage-filled cork floors grew mushy from the rain seeping in from the ceiling. Koi fry had to be introduced to keep the mosquito problem from stagnant ponds in check. Carpets disintegrated underfoot. Fungi grew and clung to your shoes.

Yet, in a weird way, Jill knew she couldn't live without it. She was now partial to its stairs, which terminated in mid-flight, parts having given way; the cordoned-off corridors, confusing bimbo customers who wandered about like lost deer. Even the packs of thrill-seeking hipsters, abseiling in the atrium, nostalgic for something they never lived through, didn't seem so bad now. There never was a quiet moment. The constant sawing hammering humming thumping drumming ringing drilling pinging and other unidentifiable vibrations drowned out any muzak playing as the mall went about its daily business of digesting itself.

It is me, thought Jill. The mall understands. Living is also dying.

The mall understood how difficult it is to lift yourself above the drudgery of life. Gravity and the elements got you, no matter how far you ran. No matter how far you ran, you took *you* with you—the infection built in, dogging your every step. With your fatalism and passivity, your bad taste in men and your proclivities. You carried in you the seeds of your own destruction. At twenty-one, with a four-year-old son, Jill often asked herself: *Why bother? Why does it even matter? Who are we kidding?* At sixteen, she had had it all mapped out. The college, the overseas university degree, the theatre acting gigs, before the teaching job, perhaps tenure in academia. Then the economic downturn had struck, and there had been no money to do any of that. She had met a man with a ponytail and bad, nicotine-stained teeth. He looked like her favourite rock star when she squinted in the

dark. She had forbidden him to go out one night to buy condoms, because she had not wanted to be alone.

Nine months later, Jason was born. The man lived in Toa Payoh, but she never saw him again. A small island can be elastic in size like that. Her father went bankrupt and killed himself, perhaps broken already that his daughter had so disgraced herself. She looked in the papers, circled the boutique assistant ad for the disposable mall, and applied.

It was hard to say if the destiny of the building affected her, or if she had built her own destiny within it.

*

4.30pm: Jill doubted if her mother was on her way to collect Jason. She had gotten used to maternal unreliability.

She picked up a hammer and screwdriver from a half-opened drawer, and proceeded to jimmy all the locks in the display cabinets. The bags they held had ceased to be commodities a long time ago. They were now dusty relics in a crumbling antiques museum. She dragged the cheap, made-in-China, faux leather specimens out and took the screwdriver to them. It was euthanasia, she decided. An act of kindness. She plunged the tool into the material over and over. Shreds remained.

After that, Jill ripped out the carpet, or whatever was left of it. It had once been an elegant mint green, with a design of vines upon it, but was now dark furry grey, veined in vomit and filth, with blackened chewing gum choking its arteries. She clawed at the carpet until her fingers were raw. Bits of plaster from the false ceiling rained down on her. She grew absorbed in her task.

*

5pm: The sirens went off. Evacuate, evacuate, they moaned. The girl in the boutique next door had not bothered to turn up for work that morning, so there was no one to see Jill hurling herself against the glass doors, trying to make them shatter. There was no one to see Jill saying goodbye to her environment, her medium, her turf, in the most physical of ways, with every fibre of her being. There was no one to see Jill.

Alone in the mall, Jill felt an exhilaration she had never felt before. It was not desperation that made her fling herself around and bounce off the walls. Part of it was a certain obsessive compulsion: if you want to destroy something, do a thorough job of it. As a child, Jill would rescue discarded packing material from recycling bins, and spend hours popping every inch of bubble wrap, squeezing each tiny plastic dome until it exploded and expelled its thin breath. But another part of it was the pure relief of giving up. Of not having to keep body and soul together any more. The cool, lightening sensation of allowing yourself to fail. She felt as though someone had loosened a tight bandanna around her forehead.

Her thoughts went to Jason. Her son. The child she had tried so hard not to let down. She felt bad for saddling him with her insane mother, but she was useless to him the way she was. He would be fine. Kids were resilient.

A thought struck Jill. She had forgotten about the mannequins, abandoned by defunct department stores in their store rooms. Should she behead or spare them? The prospect of either thrilled her.

*

5.30pm: A crowd of onlookers, kept at bay by black-and-yellow hazard tape, a hundred metres away, whipped out their mobile phones in synchrony. The demolition charges were set to go off any second now. The spectators

were on standby, poised to film the implosions. The slow crumbling inwards. The exact same scene from the same angle, many times over.

The demolition foreman, haughty in his yellow rubber boots and white hard hat, was enthroned on a bulldozer. He turned around, eyes shielded by the neon-hued, polarised sunglasses favoured by 1980s lifeguards, and saluted with his right hand—four fingers making an arc from his temple to the mall in the distance. Like someone trying to apologise for stepping on your toes in the bus queue, although that was hardly what the foreman intended.

A low rumble, and the building shook almost imperceptibly on the horizon. A hundred phone cameras in shaky hands compensated for this slight motion with their built-in anti-shake software.

And then she appeared. On everyone's screens.

A nude girl, stepping out from the front entrance, in front of the lenses of a hundred cameras. Into the frames, later, of a hundred thousand viral videos.

In one video, uploaded on YouTube later, you will hear an unseen woman screaming: "Oh my god! Someone help her!"

Nobody will move a muscle. The girl, her hair prematurely grey from the dust, will stand stock still, as though hesitating in front of her audience.

Then, the inevitable happens—more charges go off, blasting sections out, like buttons popping off a shirt. The mall, like a drunkard whose legs have been kicked out from under him, crumples slowly to the floor. An open sack of flour, dropped carelessly on the floor. Nothing more than a gigantic powder poof.

When the dust clears, the girl is gone.

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—Meira Chand, author of *A Different Sky*



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