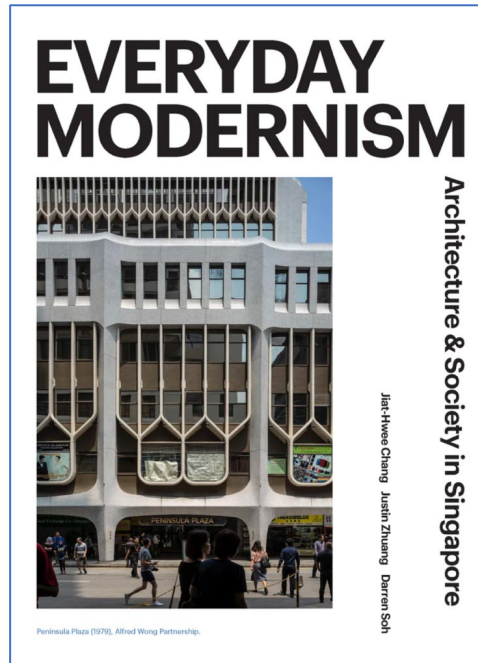


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## Book Review

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### **Everyday Modernism: Architecture and Society in Singapore**

by Jiat-Hwee Chang and Justin Zhuang, photographs by Darren Soh, *Ridge Books*, 2022, 376pp, 203 duotone and 92 4C images, ISBN: 978-981-325-187-8

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The period of rapid economic development in the post-World War II era, particularly in Asia, brought about transformative changes and distinctive urban landscapes. The emergence of the Pacific Tigers, including Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, showed how industrial transformation within the new international division of labor could lead to significant capital accumulation and spectacle. For instance, the Kuomintang (KMT) government in Taiwan shaped Taiwan's economic landscape, in accordance with the utilization of American Aid for armaments, state-owned enterprises, the rise of the petit bourgeoisie, and land reforms, such as the land-to-tiller policy. However, the failure of state regulation and the serious state of land speculation, along with minimal public housing construction, all contributed to a highly fragmented urban landscape. In contrast, however, Singapore, as a city-state with a strong bureaucratic system, has more than 80 percent public housing and high-density vertical development landscapes, which illustrates the high degree of difference between the two, revealing moreover that modernism has different meanings in diverse institutional environments.

The detailed descriptions provided in *Everyday Modernism: Architecture and Society in Singapore* offer a comprehensive overview of Singapore's unique urban development, emphasizing the distinctive characteristics that set it apart, and highlighting the intentional and

rational approach taken by Singapore in shaping its urban landscape and architecture. The establishment of a so-called "sui generis welfare state" demonstrate the city-state's commitment to a hierarchical and bureaucratic system, through which they can create self-sufficient community-oriented new towns with stratified neighborhood centers, high-density public housing, and spaces for faith and collective consumption. These initiatives reflect a meticulous program-based approach to urban development. The term "integrated urban entity" emerges as a specific manifestation of Singaporean modernism, highlighting the city-state's success in creating a cohesive and well-planned urban environment. This, in turn, suggests that the authors of *Everyday Modernism* adopt a theoretical stance when writing an alternative history of architecture through the lens of the political economy of space.

Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of "everyday life," the thematic organization around Live, Play, Work, Travel, Connect, Pray, contributes to the book's narrative by exploring the spatial and institutional production of key building types. The deliberate shaping of an "artificial analytical distance" through research on conventional collective prototypes and individual cases adds depth to the analysis, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of Singapore's rational governance and its impact on various social, economic, and spatial aspects. In



essence, the book outlines a compelling framework for understanding the impact of modernism in Singapore, emphasizing the intentional and programmatic formation of urban development.

The authors adopt a unique approach by framing the discussion within the concept of "building biography." This method allows readers to realize the physical, economic, and aesthetic transformations of buildings over time, shedding light on various influential factors such as economic regulation, social structures, and aesthetic preferences. The text reflects on the different trajectories of public housing based on ownership and management, emphasizing how policy interventions and adjustments play a crucial role in sustainable development. Therefore, when reviewing the current landscape, it becomes clear that housing of the same style and type has taken different paths due to differences in management and property owners. This analysis provides a critique of traditional perspectives which appeal to Idealism or the idea of the prevailing Zeitgeist to explain their limitations when understanding the complexity of the space production process.

The text also examines modernist aesthetics, particularly Brutalism and modernism, in the 1960s and 1970s. By tracing their roots back to the 1930s and 1980s, the authors aim to uncover the causal relationships that intensified actions and progressive policies during the highlighted period, which have contributed significantly to the admiration and prestige associated Singapore's globalization today. However, the authors intentionally raise the issue of Singapore's success seemingly to suggest that it presents a double-edged sword. They then connect the discussion to the contemporary awareness of heritage preservation in Singapore, posing essential questions about the motivations behind preservation efforts, the methods employed, and the objects deemed worthy of preservation. The concepts of "everyday modernism" and "building biography" are presented as dimensions of these concerns that address these questions, providing a positive social and architectural perspective on the challenges of heritage preservation in the context of changing times.

Overall, the book provides a fascinating perspective on modernism, suggesting that it is not a universal language, but rather a collection of "vernacular poetries" unique to Singapore. It delves into the intricate spatial strategies employed across class, capital, and state machinery, highlighting how modernism in Singapore is shaped by specific social and historical processes. The term "vernacular poetries" thus implies a localized, distinct expression of modernism that goes beyond a universal aesthetic. By presenting Everyday Modernism as a mirror reflecting the abstract "national" formation hidden behind systems and classifications, the book draws readers' attention to the deeply reflective subjectivity of Singapore's national architectural history, thereby opening a new pathway for historical writing through theoretical dialectics. Moreover, the authors challenge the notion of universal aesthetics and the prevailing trend of globalization by highlighting the local reception and contextual thinking that are often overlooked. To conclude, this book is a rich and thought-provoking

exploration of modernism in Singapore, challenging conventional narratives and encouraging a more reflective and localized understanding of architectural modernity.

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