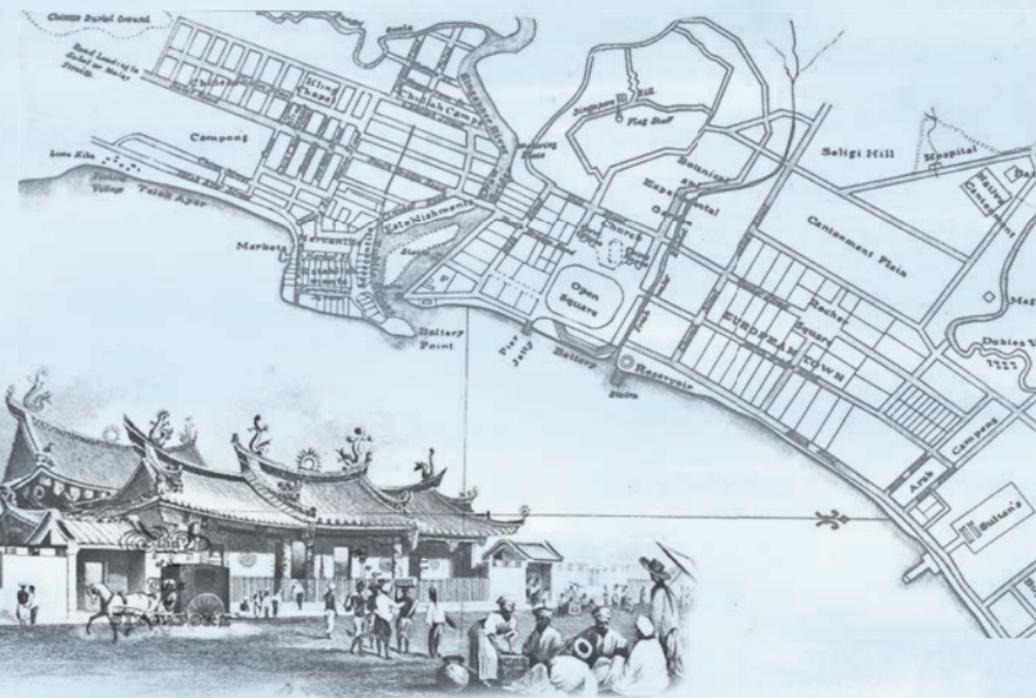


Find Your Place in History: City Centre

Architecture lost

and found | *Noelle Q. de Jesus*



Find Your Place in History: City Centre

Architecture lost

and found | *Noelle Q. de Jesus*

Find Your Place in History: City Centre Architecture lost and found

© Noelle Q. de Jesus, 2019

This e-book was written with material drawn extensively from the following sources:

[1] Imran bin Tajudeen. "Kampong Gelam, Rochor and Kallang: the Old Port Town." In *Malay Heritage of Singapore*, edited by Aileen T. Lau and Bernhard Platzdasch, 56-69. Singapore: Suntree Media, 2010.

[2] Imran bin Tajudeen. "Reading the Traditional City in Maritime Southeast Asia: Reconstructing the 19th century Port Town at Gelam-Rochor-Kallang, Singapore." In *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture 8 (2005)*, 1-26.

[3] Yeo Kang Shua. "Thian Hock Keng: A History of its Architectural Development and Geographical Siting". In *The Pearl of South China Sea: Thian Hock Keng*, 322–341. Singapore: Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, 2010.

杨苕善。〈天福宫地理及建筑沿革史〉，见《南海明珠：天福宫》，页322–341。
新加坡：新加坡福建会馆，2010。

ISBN 978-981-14-0600-3 (e-book)

Published by Ethos Books, an imprint of Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

#06-131 Midview City

28 Sin Ming Lane

Singapore 573972

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

A project by



The publisher reserves all rights to this title.

Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Cover design and layout by Cover Kitchen Co., Ltd

Digital conversion by Faris Digital Solutions Pte Ltd

About the Singapore Bicentennial e-book series

Take a quick dive into the different time periods in Singapore history, the stories and legacies of our different communities. Discover lesser-known histories of people, places and events. Each nugget offers a unique glimpse into the layered lives and histories of our people, going into topics as diverse as natural history, architecture and religious practices.

About the Singapore Bicentennial

The Singapore Bicentennial marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the British in Singapore, a turning point in our history. But our story starts way before that.

Travelling back in time to 700 years ago, the Singapore Bicentennial is an occasion for us to reflect on our extensive and textured history: how we have evolved, from a place with a geographically strategic location, into Singaporeans with a unique DNA.

This commemoration features a huge cast of contributors, as well as the regional and global developments that have shaped our lives and identities.

Find Your Place in History: City Centre

Architecture lost and found

Over the last half century, Singapore has grown and developed in a dynamic way, becoming a city with multiple focal points. Every district has within it, core areas, its rhythms latent in a diversity of people, cultures and architecture. In many instances, the historical forms of early Singapore have vanished with no visible trace. Fortunately, research by indefatigable scholars allows us to reconstruct history, and even to conserve architecture in the light of such history, contributing to a fuller understanding of the identity of the places in which we live and work.

Kampung Gelam and Rochor River

In the 19th century, the settlements around Kampung Gelam were much more extensive than the small conservation district that stands today. Thriving with people, shops and businesses, Bugis and other Malay settlements grew around Kampung Gelam, where the Sultan built his residence. Today, when we step out of Lavender MRT station, what history of Kampung Gelam and Rochor River can we still see?

The original location of Bugis Town where Bugis MRT station is today can be seen in an 1821 map. However, by 1825, as a [hydrographic chart of southern Singapore](#) kept by the British Library shows, “Bugis Town” had been moved to where Lavender MRT station is today. It was relocated when Sir Stamford Raffles

had Lieutenant Philip Jackson come up with a town plan, in which European Town would “extend along the beach, as far eastward as practicable”.¹

Lieutenant Jackson’s plan (the Jackson Plan) led to the displacement of Bugis Town and its inhabitants by European Town, and their relocation to the new ward indicated as “Bugis Campong” below:



Image 1: Plan of the town of Singapore by Lieutenant Philip Jackson, drawn in late 1822 or early 1823 and published in 1828.

Source: Survey Department, Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Within the decade, “Bugis Campong” would grow into an area that extended to present-day Lavender MRT station in the northeast and Hajjah Fatimah Mosque in the southwest. The Bugis community spread across Rochor River, populating the “Bugis Village” that is reflected in the map below. Based on the first topographical survey of Singapore by G.D. Coleman in 1829, this map presents

a snapshot of Kampung Gelam and its interconnected network of settler communities:



Image 2: Map of the town and environs of Singapore, 1836.

Source: Survey Department, Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Then, nine streets with Malay names ran through “Bugis Campong”. These have disappeared from memory. Rochor River, which looks like a mere canal today, was an important river for maritime trade, a channel for boats ferrying goods to and from ships that were harbouring in deep waters.

Encountering these and other histories painstakingly reconstructed by scholars, we experience fascinating connections between the history of our storied land and our present lives.



Image 3: Imran Tajudeen reading a 19th century map and reconstructing the port town at Gelam-Rochor-Kallang, 2018. Courtesy of Ethos Books.

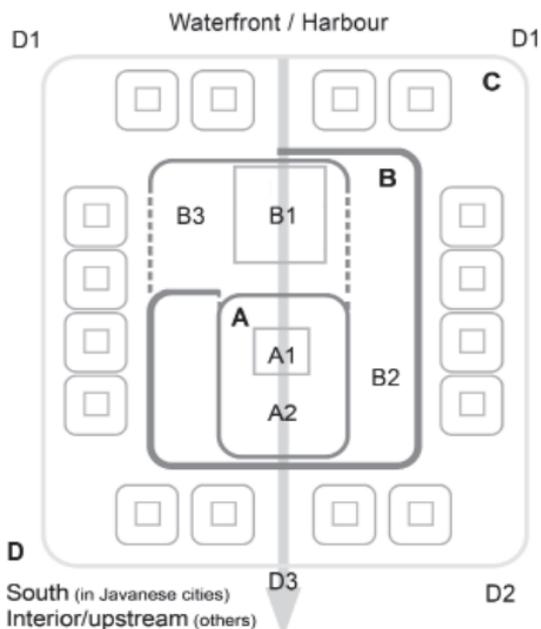
Kota Raja and the old port town at Kampung Gelam

The international port that nourished the growth of Singapore and gave it a reputation that is remembered even in the 19th century began in the days of 14th century Singapura, a traditional entrepôt port town on the delta of the river.² It existed in the 15th to 16th centuries as a naval base for the Melakan fleet, a fiefdom of the chief minister who commanded the Sultan's navy, and in the 17th century as the port of the Syahbandar or harbourmaster for Johor.

When Tengku Long of Riau was installed as Sultan Hussein Shah in Singapore in 1819, he brought his followers and established the nucleus of the port town, a self-contained royal citadel, in Kampung Gelam. Kota Raja started off humbly enough, with

a large rambling attap habitation for a “palace” or istana at its core,³ a “royal square” or padang, and a state mosque.⁴ Around this centre, a marketplace and settlement grew.

Today’s Istana Kampong Glam, comfortably nestled within a bustling network of cafes and shophouses, stands on the same ground as the istana of Kota Raja; it is the third physical incarnation of the istana, the seat of Sultan Hussein’s social and political power two hundred years ago.



Gradient from centre to periphery

A. Royal Palace Complex

A1 - istana / kraton (palace)
A2 - taman (royal garden)

B. Kota Raja

B1 - Central Urban Complex comprising royal square (called alun-alun, padang, etc), state mosque, marketplace, customs house (pabean), aristocratic residences (administrative/judicial)
B2 - Inner Royal Precinct (Kampung Dalam), housing aristocratic traders/merchant princes, craftsmen, followers, and retainers

B3 - Outer Royal Precinct, housing religious leaders and teachers, craftsmen (tukang)

C. Traders' Quarters (Kampung Dagang)

comprising compounds of chief merchants, marketplaces (commodities, warehousing)

D. Outer Quarters/Suburbs

D1 - shipbuilding and repair
D2 - craftsmen and industries (eg kilns, salt)
D3 - makam (tombs / burial complex)

Image 4: Main features of the traditional city in maritime Southeast Asia.

Source: Revised version of Diagram 3, Morphology of the traditional city in maritime Southeast Asia, in Imran bin Tajudeen. "Reading the Traditional City in Maritime Southeast Asia: Reconstructing the 19th century Port Town at Gelam-Rochor-Kallang, Singapore." In *Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture* 8 (2005), 1-26.

The royal palace complex through the years

Within the royal palace complex, the istana stood as the symbolic heart of power and influence, reinforced by various structures: high walls enclosed the compound and were broken up by large gateways, which were in turn guarded by watch towers.

The palace area was not immune to the pressures of urbanisation: in the 1836 map, North Bridge Road had already cut through the palace compound, dividing it into two halves. Road works led to the demolition of old enclosure walls or kota, and new walls were built for the istana compound.

The palace area did assert its presence on the process of urbanisation: North Bridge Road had to deviate from the grid to swerve past the back of the palace (and the mosque)—the 1836 map shows the Malay street name “Jalan Chondong” (see Image 2), meaning slanted or leaning road, which reflects local Malay knowledge that this road had swerved or deviated from the planned grid.

Resonances of the old palace’s presence can be heard in the names of streets like Jalan Pinang, Pisang, Klapa, Kledek (areca nut, banana, coconut, sweet potato). These names refer to trees in the royal orchard or taman, which was sited behind the Sultan’s istana, designed for the leisure and pleasure of the royal family, besides their obvious utility.

The royal cemetery labelled “Tombs of the Malayan Princes” in the 1836 map, marked with three spots that possibly corresponded to important old graves, survives as Jalan Kubor cemetery today.

The central urban complex

The padang, the mosque, and the market can be seen as forming a central urban complex, each serving a specific purpose.

The padang was an open area intended for public ceremonies, celebrations and tournaments, and also a venue to welcome foreigners to the city before they were let into the court and the palace. Singapore has, from the very outset, been a site for international trade, and the padang, or as the Javanese would call it, the alun-alun, was the first stop for foreign traders who came to the port town to conduct trade.

The mosque is none other than Sultan Mosque. Its earlier faces would not be recognisable to us today: in 1846, Sultan Mosque featured a Javanese/Sumatran three-tiered roof, with outer columns that were brick and plaster, but whose main structure would doubtless have been made of hardwood such as Bornean Ulin (ironwood) or perhaps teak. With a main hall of approximately 30x30 metres square, the mosque was sizeable, and larger than the historic 18th century mosques of Melaka built under Dutch rule that still stand today. The mosque was connected to a Muslim-Javanese quarter, Kampung Kaji, a row of nipa roof and timber shophouses on the street leading up to the mosque.

The marketplace then was much larger in size and operating at a scale way larger than what we see of the Arab Street area today. Small and narrow shophouses, built in the 1840s, also served as homes to tailors, bookshop owners, blacksmiths and craftsmen. They resembled 16th century shophouses found along trade roads leading to the grand mosque in Aceh. The Javanese touch could have been the hand of pilgrim brokers who brought their taste alongside their commerce to Singapore.

A banyan tree that stands at Sultan Gate is witness to the transformation of the urban complex over time. It is likely one of a pair that had marked and survived the padang.

The inner and outer royal precincts

Radiating outwards from the urban complex were the dwellings of aristocratic traders, which can be seen as an inner royal precinct, and an outer royal precinct housing the settlements of religious leaders, craftsmen and other artisans. Outside the walls of the royal citadel were the traders' quarters, beyond which were shipbuilding compounds as well as water-settlements like the five villages along Kallang River, home to around 5,000 inhabitants. These water-settlements were houses constructed on stilts over water, served by boats as the main form of transportation.

Remembering Kampung Gelam

Most of Kampung Gelam and its network of settlements have given way to the pressures and challenges of urban development. In 1929 and into the 1930s, the kampongs along the Kallang waterway were destroyed to make way for the airport that opened officially in 1937. The inhabitants moved to the Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement near Geylang Serai, built on land secured by Mohamed Eunos Abdullah. This Malay settlement has since been destroyed.

The streets of Kampong Rochor and its rows of shophouses were pulled down in the 1960s, and the sole surviving building is Hajjah Fatimah Mosque. The nine streets bearing nine different Malay names in the 1836 map were renamed in the 1840s with names such as Java Road, Palembang Road, Minto Road, and

Sumbawa Road. Of these names, Java Road and Minto Road remain, but designate roads entirely different from the original. Likewise, the original houses of prominent Singapore families like Alsagoff and Ambo Sooloh are lost. Many village names are also forgotten—the Malay Indonesian communities and their shophouses at Kampong Kaji (Bussorah Street), Kampong Jawa (Arab Street), and Kampong Melayu (Kandahar and North Bridge Road).

Sultan Mosque, the many varied shops and eating spots in Kampong Glam hark today's Singaporean back to Kota Raja, the core of the old port town of Kampung Gelam.

The Chinese Campong

In the first quarter of the 19th century, most Chinese migrants to Singapore came from the southern coastal provinces of China. They were subsequently joined by Chinese merchants from Melaka, which had passed from the Dutch into British hands. The Chinese immigrant population grew to become the largest ethnic group on the island.

Before the Jackson Plan, most of the Chinese stayed on the southern bank of the Singapore River, in the Boat Quay area. Many of the remaining settled in Kampung Gelam. Under British administration, these early Chinese settlers had to move out of the Boat Quay and Kampung Gelam areas—the area southwest of Boat Quay was specifically set aside for the Chinese community, indicated in the Jackson Plan as “the Chinese Campong”.

Clan associations and Chinese temples

It has been suggested that the clan associations were founded in part as a political response to the Jackson Plan, which forced the Chinese to move out of their original settlements. To resist further impositions of British order, the Chinese felt it would be better to unite and consolidate their power so as to protect their way of life, work and worship.

A clan association was a social structure based on ancestral and geographical origins. In the 1820s, Chinese communities set up many of such associations and other self-help groups: these included the Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (1822) and Heung Shan Wui Kuan (1820s) for the Cantonese, the Ying Fo Kun (commonly known as Ying Fo Fui Kun, 1823) for the Hakkas, Wak Hai Cheng Bio (or Yueh Hai Ching Temple) for the Teochews, Heng San Teng (1827), Kim Lan Beo (1830) and Keng Teck Whay (1831) for the Hokkiens, Fuk Tak Chi Temple (1824) for the Hakkas and Cantonese, and Tin Hou Kong (1857) for the Hainanese community.

The first of Chinese clan associations were often set up in the same grounds as temples, supported by the building funds of rich merchants. These places became gathering points for social, spiritual as well as work purposes: shared cultural backgrounds, dialects and religious beliefs enabled close collaboration for business and public service.

Wealthy merchants raised funds for building temples, ancestral halls, clan association buildings, shophouses, schools and other public spaces. They lobbied the British government, securing land use for building works, constructing architecture following traditional forms originating from their hometowns: each dialect community hired artisans and bought material from their ancestral regions. By asserting cultural heritage, ethnic identity and religious belief in the form of architecture, the business

leaders—who were often also clan leaders—were consolidating their political and social power. Buildings served as projections of clan unity and political influence for Chinese community leaders.

Thian Hock Keng at Telok Ayer

The Hokkiens built their place of worship, Thian Hock Keng, in Quanzhou-style architecture following their Minnan roots. A place of worship and association, Thian Hock Keng was dedicated to the worship of Mazu, Goddess of the Seas. It was built between 1839 and 1842, with additions to the complex completed by 1850. The temple committee behind its construction comprised Presidents Tan Tock Seng, Si Hoo Keh and Kiong Kong Tuan, as well as nine council members.



Image 5: A lithograph of Thian Hock Keng and the early communities along Telok Ayer Street, 1842. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

On its Telok Ayer location, the temple faces the east and has its back to the west. It was sited according to the fundamentals of

fengshui: facing a body of water (Telok Ayer Bay before land reclamation) and backed by hills (Ann Siang Hill, previously known as Scott's Hill and then as Gemmill's Hill). In 1860, the Hokkien Huay Kuan was established and located within the temple grounds, where it remained until 1954.

Shifting sands



Image 6: Plan of Singapore town and adjoining districts from actual survey by J. T. Thomson, Governor Surveyor, 1844. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Reclamation, a constant theme in the creation of modern Singapore, reconfigured the landscape surrounding Thian Hock Keng. Abutting the shoreline at its time of construction, this

temple is now completely inland, safe from wave erosion, which had threatened coastal establishments along Telok Ayer Bay.

Following persistent lobbying by a group of merchants—who as early as 1863 had offered to build a pier and an embankment within the bay, and reclaim land to build warehouses—their repeated call for land reclamation in 1865 stirred the colonial government into action. A large-scale civil engineering project was carried out between 1878 and 1885: hills along the coastal areas, including part of Scott's Hill (Ann Siang Hill), Mount Erskine and Mount Wallich, were levelled to provide the earth for reclamation purposes. Another round of land reclamation for the Telok Ayer Bay took place between 1904 to 1915, and surrounding hillocks and the remaining parts of Mount Wallich were levelled as part of this project.

Today, most of the hills in this area are no longer; in Ann Siang Hill, we can discern a trace of the original fengshui—the hills and water body—that had drawn the temple builders to Telok Ayer Bay.

Traditional architecture meets other styles and local material

Thian Hock Keng represents a fidelity to and expression of an architecture style in memory of Quanzhou when it was first constructed. In a multicultural environment, traditional buildings like Thian Hock Keng often start assimilating elements from other architectural styles, over the course of time.

Investigating the restoration work of Thian Hock Keng carried out by the Hokkien Huay Kuan, Yeo Kang Shua notes the introduction of western architectural elements in 1906: the timber balustrades in the porch of the Entrance Hall were replaced by cast-iron balustrades from Glasgow, Scotland; small windows in a western

neoclassical style were built in the Rear Hall; the granite slabs of the courtyards were replaced by patterned tiles from the United Kingdom. Yeo suggests these changes could be due to the stewardship of Tan Boo Liat, the great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng, who was influenced by western culture while studying at Raffles College.



Image 7: The floor tiles and wall tiles used in Thian Hock Keng (left to right, top to bottom): (1) encaustic tiles used for the floor inside the hall, (2) encaustic tiles used in parts of the Main Hall, (3) encaustic tiles used for part of the flooring of the walkway, (4) coloured cement tiles for the courtyards and part of the walkway, (5) the hexagonal tiles on the floor of the side wings (the hexagonal patterns resemble “tortoise shells” symbolising health and longevity), as well as (6) polychrome ceramic tiles that form the dado.

Photographed in 2009. Courtesy of Yeo Kang Shua.

The use of construction material from local sources is also unavoidable for financial and practical reasons. The 1906 *Record of the Restoration of Thian Hock Keng* mentions the use of hardwood, or Jati, which abounded locally. “Jati” is Malay for teakwood.⁵ In fact, Yeo’s meticulous research on the building records reveals that granite from Pulau Ubin rather than China could have been used in the original construction of Thian Hock Keng. This challenges the prevailing conclusion that the construction

materials used for the original temple buildings were sourced from China.⁶

The cost of remembering

Over the decades, the Hokkien Huay Kuan has funded more than S\$6.5 million for the restoration and repair works of Thian Hock Keng.⁷ What's more, for as long as the timber structures continue to be endangered by wood borers such as termites, woodboring beetles, longhorn beetles and wasps, and by the humid tropical climate, continuing restoration efforts will only persevere.

Endnotes

1 Wright, A. and Cartwright, H.A. (editors). (1908). *Twentieth century impressions of British Malaya: its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources*. London, Durban, Colombo, Perth (W.A.), Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd.

2 Singapura's reputation and prominence in the *Sejarah Melayu* account of history prompted Raffles to consider it as a viable option to set up a base. Likewise, it was a known location to regional traders who gave Singapore its early boost as a centre for trade.

3 Cornelius, V. (2015, August 6). "Istana Kampong Glam." In *Singapore Infopedia*. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_101_2004-12-24.html

4 Sir Stamford Raffles pledged a contribution of 3,000 Spanish dollars from the East India Company to the royal mosque's building fund.

5 The term “噶智” was not deciphered until Wee Sheau Theng suggested to the author in 2009 to attempt pronouncing the term in the Hokkien dialect. The term is pronounced as *jiá tì*, which means “teak” in Malay.

6 “所有的建材，据说全是从中国搬运来的”
柯木林，〈古色古香的天福宫〉，见林孝胜、张夏伟等，《石叻古迹》；
柯木林〈古色古香的天福宫〉，见《石叻史记》，页222。

“The new temple was built in 1839-42 by designers and craftsmen and using materials from China.” Edwards, N. and Keys, P. (1988). *Singapore: a guide to buildings, streets, places*. Singapore: Times Books International, p. 438.

“The pillars of iron wood and granite and the carved stoneworks used for this temple were imported from China at a handsome expense”. Lee, E. (1990). *Historic Buildings of Singapore*. Singapore: Preservation of Monuments Board, p. 71.

“All the materials were sent from China as were the artisans who crafted the decorations.” Liu, G. (1996). *In granite and chunam: the national monuments of Singapore*. Singapore: Landmark Books, p. 128.

“All the materials used to build the temple came from China.” Lee, G.B. (2002). *The religious monuments of Singapore: faiths of our forefathers*. Singapore: Preservation of Monuments Board, p. 12.

7 “Thian Hock Keng Temple.” Retrieved from <http://thianhockkeng.com.sg/site/our-legacy-architecture/>

About the author

Noelle Q. de Jesus moved from the Philippines to Singapore in 2000 and has lived here with her husband and children since then. She is the author of *Blood Collected Stories* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015) which won the 2016 Next Generation Indie Book Award for Short Story (Fiction), and *Cursed And Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2019). Her work has been published throughout Southeast Asia and in literary journals in the United States, including *Puerto del Sol*, *Mud Season Review* and *Witness*. She is a Singapore permanent resident and a freelance copywriter and editor. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University and has worked as sub- and features editor for women's magazines at both SPH Magazines and MediaCorp Publishing.

About Ethos Books

Giving voice to emerging and exciting writers from diverse backgrounds, we help foster an environment in which literature and the arts not only survive, but thrive.

That's why our authors and their ideas come first. By taking a collaborative approach to publishing, we bring each author's voice and vision to fruition.

We are always open to new ideas: different ways of working and fresh ways of delivering the unparalleled satisfaction only a good book can bring.

Established in 1997, Ethos Books, an imprint of Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd, aims to create books that capture the spirit of a people and reflect the ethos of our changing times.

Visit us at www.ethosbooks.com.sg

About Coverkitchen

Coverkitchen is an award-winning book cover art studio based in Bangkok. Founded in 2006 by Xavier Comas and Rafael Andres, a Barcelona-born team of creatives with over 30-year experience in visual arts. True to its international and multicultural profile, Coverkitchen designs covers for both publishers and independent authors worldwide in English, Spanish, Catalan, Dutch, German, French, Turkish and Arabic. Among its awarded covers are *Viajo Sola* by Samuel Bjork and *The Devil's Garden* by Nigel Barley. To review our portfolio visit www.coverkitchen.com