Varying Progressions: Selected Graphic Symbols of Singapore, 1956–2003

Conversation between Singapore Graphic Archives & Temporary Press

June/October 2018

The first part [A] of this written conversation was originally published as an afterword in *Symbols of Singapore, 1956–2003*, a small book featuring selections of graphic symbols from the independently-run Singapore Graphic Archives (Justin Zhuang) that was published and produced by Temporary Press (gideon-jamie). To accompany our installation at the Fikra Graphic Design Biennial, we have extended this conversation [B] to further reflect upon the collaboration and the role of a design archives in Singapore and outside of it.

[A]

gideon-jamie:
I understand the larger motivation behind the archives is to create a space for discussion and discourse about (graphic) design in Singapore; there needs to be a collection of materials before one can even start talking about a history, distinctive practices, or influence of graphic design from Singapore. Your efforts in both archiving and putting together such materials about them is significant, even admirable considering the small community of interest. This publication, in many ways less formal and of smaller scale compared to other projects you completed, allows for a different approach. Instead of an objective presentation, this allows a close reflection on the open-ended and at times ambiguous (which is by no means negative) nature in the processes of archiving and interpretation.
Before discussing this, maybe you can describe the processes and intentions in gathering the materials so far for the Singapore Graphic Archives. It will also be interesting to know more about its relation-ship (if any) with institutions like the DesignSingapore Council [↗ designsingapore.org] (or any other) since the work of the archive probably overlaps with some of their objectives.

Justin Zhuang:
The Singapore Graphic Archives was started in 2011, just as I finished writing *Independence: The History of Graphic Design in Singapore since the 1960s*. In my research for this publication commissioned by The Design Society [↗ designsociety.sg], I discovered a wealth of "Singapore designs" from interviewees, old newspapers and publications. Not all of these made it into the book for a variety of reasons. As I wanted to continue researching on Singapore's design histories even after the book was published, I figured it would be good to have some kind of platform to reach out to the public and spark other projects. Around the time, I discovered the Malaysia Design Archive [↗ malaysiadesignarchive.org], then just a website started by Ezrena Marwan. That inspired me to create what was originally named the "Singapore Visual Archive".
Since then, the archives has always "suffered" as my side project. I've kept it simple because it is just me running it. After spending two years in New York City studying for my MFA in Design Criticism, I was further inspired by other design archives there. The Herb Lubalin Study Center of Design and Typography, which is essentially run by curator Alexander Tochilovsky, and Display, a website featuring the mid-century design collection of Greg D'Onofrio and Patricia Belen, were two projects that showed me different ideas of what a design archive could be. Thanks to the generous help of Pettycache, Swarm and Watchtower Digital, the archive became more than just a Wordpress website. I also changed our name to focus on "Graphic" works instead of "Visuals" to emphasise that we were interested in the construction of design. Instead of a singular archive, we also want-ed to be an "archive" holding different types of collections, ranging from designs to recordings of interviews with designers, etc.
When I started the archives, it was simply about uploading works from *Independence and Signs of the Times*, a rare 1995 compilation of logos from Singapore. As I started researching the origins of these designs and designers at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, it dawned on me that it was essentially a design archive. After all, graphic designers produce printed matter! So whenever I spend time in the library to work, I also hunt for logos. This could mean by looking up books, annual reports and ephemera published by specific organisations or browsing the stacks to see if there is anything of interest. It's really about looking at the library's materials through the lens of graphic design. Generally, I look out for designs produced for and from Singapore before the 2000s. The designs may be from significant organisations in the nation's history, popular with the public or visually attractive to me. One reason we have not really archived contemporary designs is because today's designers have built "archives" of their work online via their website and on platforms like Behance. Historically speaking, the formation of the Design-Singapore Council, Singapore's national design agency, in 2003, also marked a change in what design meant locally.
The archives has always stayed independent because we want to be open to all kinds of design histories. We have not applied for government funding because that means other interests come into play. Plus, we are not a champion for "Singapore design" or heritage. Instead, "graphic design" and history is a lens for us to look at the world we live in today. For instance, we have the National Day Parade logos in our archives not because they are "good design"—which we do not seek to define. But these logos are expressions of how graphic designers interact with a particular group of people (the military) to construct "Singapore" and "nationalism" visually. Speaking about the military, we also have a collection of advertisements that feature weapons designed in Singapore. They are visually arresting graphics but we are also interested in displaying the lesser known fact that this country designs things that kill. Design is not a solution, but a problem too.

GJ Perhaps this is a good reason for the Singapore Graphic Archives to remain independent. These descriptions remind me of the question: how much of history is constructed based on intent, power/ prominence, availability, or simply chance? Also, how much of this is the case for a Singapore "design history" if there is one. Or we can also ask, what are the conceptual implications of these considerations on this small publication?

JZ History is ultimately (re)constructed. We will never know 100% why or how something happened. I am fascinated with history because we can use it to understand the present state of things. It also shows us alternatives that can spur the future. The archives draw out this subject of "Singapore design" history because we are interested in distributing design as a form of knowledge. We see ourselves as a public commons for anyone to use design as material to create, evaluate and even take apart histories. While I use "Singapore design history" to reflect on the state of this country, others may use it to evoke nostalgia or even teach design! This is why I asked you to suggest what kind of publication the press would create out of the archives' collection. We are excited to see how this can be of use or interest to others outside of the realm of history too.
This publication also marks our first venture to go into print, a medium that offers new ways to read the archives' collection. Unlike the online archives, the chronological layout of this book allows us to see shifts in design styles. Seeing the logos separate from the historical information also allows us to see these as visual objects first.

GJ As you have said, many of the graphic symbols here are reproduced from existing, sometimes secondary sources. Yet, these are older print artefacts or publications that are likely no longer easily available or accessible (one has to know where to look to find them). For this reason, consolidating them in this deliberately handy format allows easy and convenient reference to what might otherwise be accessible only in fragments or through unnecessarily large and glossy logo books that are still as popular as before. I see this contrast in presentation—down to the imperfections limited by the reproduction process (Riso-graph)—as a reflection of both the intentions of the press (a part of it is to publish what is in our view, outcomes that are urgent yet preliminary/in-progress) and of the archives, which can be described as an invitation and call-to-action towards the public. This is either to examine the presence or identify the lack of a history of graphic design (in this case through the limited form of logos and symbols) in Singapore.

JZ The spirit of your press is very close to how I have envisioned the archives. We started out online partially because the medium allows us to publish first, think later. Even if the information about a design is incomplete, putting it out there allows people to realise it exists. They can then respond by making observations, sharing personal information about the design and even starting to draw comparisons to other things in the archives or even what they have seen elsewhere. One could say the archives points out stars in the night sky. Once you start looking up, it matters less to us if you admire the star, search for other stars or even draw out constellations. Most importantly, you will never forget that there is this thing called a "star" and it is part of a larger universe.

GJ This leads to my point about what some might already notice—the immediate visual connection with what is frequently referred to as "modernist" logos. Anyone unfamiliar with this term can quickly search online and find or even appreciate the similarity between these graphic marks that, in the spirit of modernism, create and communicate the "identity" of the organisations represented with efficiency and clarity. In fact, some hold the view that "all good logos are modernist" and in that sense, enforce a particular style and approach across nations and cultures. In light of this visual and ideological similarity, we can ask if design in Singapore and the progress it often boasts of is more representative of design as a cultural activity or a strategy for economic growth. (I am going to avoid the easy way out to say that it is a mix of the two.) The former is significant of a deeper shared sensibility and appreciation of a good design that is subjective yet relevant to Singaporeans, the latter signifies the use of "design" as merely another tool for driving economy, though this time with more involvement from its citizens. I can't help but reflect on the state of design when "reading" this selection of symbols and speculating if their existence and the efforts surrounding them were shaped more by external than internal factors/ motivation. I am interested to find out in further detail: how much of the graphic symbols represented here are "Singaporean" in your opinion (whether that means designed by Singaporeans, containing traits we might identify with, or simply based on geographical reasons)? I know it is not possible to provide any in-depth analysis in this simple written conversation. Still, with your interactions with many local designers and looking up related materials in the process of building this archives, there may be sign posts to initial answers, or even to the irrelevance of this question considering the rate of progress we are enjoying despite a lack of—with slight irony—"identity" in design.

JZ I actually started writing about design in search of this very question: What is Singapore design? I've come to realise there is no singular definition. If you think MUJI is "Japanese design", how do you account for the fact that many of its products are not designed by Japanese? How do we also explain other "Japanese designs" such as the messy and loud street style of Harajuku? We need to look at "Singapore design" as a contest of ideas rather than a coherent identity.
That said, the logos in this book and the archives represents quite a sizeable collection from and about the government. Thus, I would say that "Singapore design" in this context is about projecting the city-state as modern. In the 1960s, the government introduced "design" into Singapore as part of an industrialisation drive. When it opened its first design school, Baharuddin Vocational Institute, the staff were sent for training in developed countries such as USA, Canada and Japan. For very long, Singapore's design industry was dominated by expatriate creative directors from Australia and the UK as well as a few locals trained in the same countries. They all preached the gospel of the "modern" to the government. And this was readily accepted because we want to be as developed as the West. By 1987, when The Straits Times [straits times.com] ran an article about the trend of Singapore organisations adopting new logos, it noted how they have become simpler over the years. One of the most sought after Singapore graphic designers then, William Lee, summed up a good logo to be "simple, striking". He added, "A logo is international. It has to be understood at one look..." These ideas related to modern design were widely published in mainstream newspapers then. Unlike today, where rebrands and new logos hardly make the news anymore, it was common to see announcements of changes in logo designs that were accompanied by write-ups on explaining the symbolism. In this way, Singaporeans were educated to equate design as modern.
Actually, the question of what "Singapore design" seem less of a concern until more recent times. Not only is there a new generation curious about their roots, Singapore's design industry also has a new force to reckon with: tourism. If design was previously all about helping businesses and the government look "modern" so as to succeed internationally, Singapore now also needs to differentiate itself from so many other modern cities. Design is expected to fashion that image for us, especially in the tourism sector. This can be seen in the recent trend of "Singapore souvenirs", an example of a "Singapore design" product that can be easily marketed and exported.

GJ This is something worth looking into beyond this conversation and I am sure there are many interested in this wider discussion you kickstarted in the article "Got Singapore Design?" in The Design Society Journal (No.5, p.56–65). Despite there being different ideas on what constitutes "Singaporean design", we cannot deny the fact that many of these (some unquestionably well-designed) graphic symbols are already partially embedded in the history of design in Singapore and whether it reflects a sobering or celebratory narrative is another question altogether. For me, there is a sense of familiarity or (I guess even a country-wide) identification with a handful of the logos but most of the others exude confident, clear, but unfamiliar ideals for us as young Singaporeans. Ironically, the former are those of everyday, inconspicuous brands instead of significant public events or prominent organisations.
To end, we'd like to ask a final question that is perhaps already expressed through the design and publication of this small booklet: how do you envision the local community of organisations or individual researchers, designers, and students to play a role in the larger aspirations of the archive, or to put it more broadly by quoting from the website, "to promote a critical appreciation of the city state's visual culture"?

JZ Knowledge is power. Firstly, the archive is calling out the fact that Singapore is made up of signs, symbols and images. Secondly, the archive is saying that these are constructed by people who have intentions and assumptions about the audience they are reaching out to. Thus, by making available many different collections of designs, we invite others to consider the relationships between them as well as what they have seen. Ultimately, design is a language that can be read, decoded and interpreted. It offers us a lens to see how the world that we live in is perceived and organised. The archives hopes to play a small role in raising such an awareness in Singapore.

GJ I guess a collective effort is required, one that will benefit both the archives and the community. I find this description—to promote a critical appreciation of Singapore's visual culture—key in identifying a general approach to thinking about graphic design in Singapore. Often, we are either too critical in expressing dissatisfaction with the state of understanding in design, wondering if there is even a space for individual and collective growth on par with more culturally exciting parts of the world, or too ignorant and comfortable with appreciating half-baked notions and narratives of "SG" designs presented either (mainly) for economical or state-driven intentions. "Critical appreciation", a term that reminds us to be neither condemnatory nor to blindly accept/admire, is for a start, how we hope its readers will approach this little compilation—a visual document that tells a history-in-progress of Singapore through symbolic representations of both known and unknown brands, bodies, organisations, and our collective experiences with them.

— June 2018

[B]

Justin Zhuang
What do these logos and symbols mean to you as a graphic designer? I've always been curious how practitioners see and use the archives differently from my vision for it.

gideon-jamie:
As designers living within a constructed, as well as as constantly "shifting" culture, we have always been interested in the past: about how things were, and how they came to be. Our interest is not so much in history as an academic discipline (although it serves it just as well or even better) but about reflection and progression. It helps us reflect upon what is and progress into what can be, not so much about being innovative but to make meaning "responsibly". Much of what we do and are interested in is finding or creating new meanings from the "past". This, to us, can be pragmatic (what is already existing and available), conceptual (as imagined, constructed, politicised, etc.), or simply historical (individual or collective background of thoughts, culture, and engagements). When there is an understanding of the past in these ways, meaning can be carried forward or created (built on) through acts of design (or non-design in some cases). This can be observed in the process of designing a logo for any representing body (since we are on this topic). To "create" meaning through the design of a symbol or system, it is not unreasonable to expect the designer to understand the "past" of the representing body in three ways: what is immediately identifiable and could be used for building on (visually, for example), what might have been problematic (misrepresentations of any kind, to be argued, of course), and the historical context of that representing body or anything associated with it (past logos, narratives, etc.). Not everyone shares our point of view or work in this manner, but we find this a good way to avoid being trapped in an endless cycle of repetition. So, when we first saw what Singapore Graphic Archives has collected, we felt guilty of being hypocritical in some way. These were entirely new to us. Much of what we have designed and made in the context of Singapore, which is where we are based, is void of an understanding of its "past". (Here, I refer to this on a larger scale; instead of a project like the previous example, I am referring to a practice.) We are practicing design from/in Singapore without understanding its past as much as we will like to. And being Singaporeans, we hope our practice can be situated geographically as much as it should expand beyond it. Working with the materials for this biennial (as well as our earlier book) is our way of seeing and using the archives, probably not how it is typically regarded as historical material. We like to see this as creating open-ended inquiries from what seems to be "fixed" historical information, while encouraging more to become—if they are not already—aware and curious of the rich amounts of graphic materials from Singapore. This helps us to engage with the archives as a way of "reflecting" and "progressing", even if that happens only introspectively. So, to go back to the question on what the archives mean to us, they are a (visual-cultural) past we never got a chance to fully understand and experience (of which might be the source of criticism for our work with the archives). The archives provide us with a pragmatic, conceptual, and historical—though at times imagined—past we feel is needed for a Singapore-based design practice to be practically, critically, and contextually relevant. This needs elaboration but we will save it for another time.

We are also interested to find out how you see the archives in this new situation, when a part of it is shown outside of Singapore. How might you imagine the archives to be seen in comparison to it in Singapore? What do you feel about having an additional layer of interpretation introduced to the contents in the archive?

JZ The archives exists online (as a website and on Instagram) and I believe we do have several overseas followers. What's new in our collaboration is we have re-entered the offline world via a book, and now, this installation. In our earlier conversation, I explained why we started out online.
I'm excited about how both of you have used the archives to critique Singapore's state of design. It's also very generous of you two to have involved me. This is one way I hope the archives can be used more. I'm reminded of "lab" initiatives in institutions such as the New York Public Library and the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum where the collection is creatively interpreted to form new perspectives. A collection or an archive is only useful as a generator of knowledge.
As we were figuring out our installation, I've also become more aware of how the archives reflects my biases and interests. My approach to design is from a historical/socio-cultural perspective, thus I document when a design is made, its creators, clients, etc. I also categorise designs based on structures such as "telecommunications", "politics" or "government". This is

unlike many designers who probably see shapes and styles in these symbols instead.
Without local context, I suspect most visitors to the installation will also approach the symbols as a visual language rather than material culture per se. There would also be a wide-eyed fascination like when one becomes a tourist in a foreign country. Hopefully, the accompanying names that appear with each symbol will prompt visitors to dwell a little deeper into how visuals represent certain structures/ideas in and about Singapore.

Talk us through how this installation is a "critique on the state of graphic design and its history in Singapore". What are some concerns and observations that you have?

GJ Somewhere along our email exchanges for this installation, we proposed the idea of a "critique" on the state of graphic design history in Singapore. We admit that we often casually label works outside of the "usual" commissions this way. Yet, we are also skeptical of such a label especially when it is used to differentiate rather than create awareness and change. So, instead of verbalising the "critique", which defeats the purpose of the work, we highlight some of our concerns and observations through describing the process behind this installation. Hopefully this might allow the critical nature of the work—if any—to unfold alongside an actual experience of it.
Our initial idea was to find different ways of presenting the symbols such that viewers could arrange them into various categories within set limitations. In retrospect, this was tricky because of the wide variety of graphic symbols. There were a fairly fragmented range of visual characteristics and styles despite the fact that most belong to national organisations or events. (For example, in the book, there is often one or two logos that do not fit in aesthetically.) This is not entirely undesirable. In fact, we quite like how all of them fit into different expectations of how graphic symbols or logos should look. This inconsistency could also indicate Singapore's in-progress "search" for a visual identity, or a disregard for any (the concept of a national visual identity is also problematic depending on how and for what it is created for). While you mentioned previously about the state pushing for a "modernised" aesthetic, we note several examples that sit awkwardly (visually) at its margins. Our installation can be read as a critique of this phenomenon.
Unlike the earlier idea, this installation adopts a more neutral approach towards its contents. It consists two looping projections, each projecting an identical selection of graphic symbols arranged chronologically. The only difference is their highly contrasting projection speeds (slides per minute), which is what allows for various ways to read the work. For instance, it could hint at Singapore's push for or pull away from "modernisation" and the visual consistency that comes with it. Furthermore, the challenge for a viewer in studying or comparing any of the graphic symbols meaningfully as they are constantly in motion—either too quickly or slowly—could also reflect the relationship between graphic design and history in Singapore. This reveals that, either, we are moving too quickly without much concern about the past (partially reflected through the almost overnight adoption of the modernist aesthetic), or there is an unwillingness or lack of ability to progress into contemporary ideas of design (partially reflected through a general emphasis on reminiscence/nostalgia as strategies to create a local identity). This eventually makes it difficult for any form of "critical appreciation" to

occur, and hopefully will direct viewers to the archives' website for any further understanding.
Still, we must admit that our lack of extensive knowledge about the symbols makes any statements communicated through the installation understandably questionable. This is a limitation we acknowledge and is directly reflected in our approach in putting forth ambiguous propositions against the general narrative of Singapore's accelerated and celebrated growth. We hope this brings about further discussions on alternative narratives through more rigorous ways of examining the materials so diligently kept in the Singapore Graphic Archives.

For any critique to be a fair or reasonable one, much of it has to be situated in a strong contextual understanding. It will be useful for us to know the historical (and cultural/economical) context of logo design in Singapore. Through our discussion, I read several of the newspaper articles you found about this phenomenon in Singapore. Are there any general observations you can make?

JZ Building upon what I mentioned in our first conversation, there seems to have been a national movement in the 1970s and 1980s for organisations and companies to adopt logos and corporate identity. Prior to this, "corporate identity" was seemingly more literal, often signage expressed in various typefaces. In the beginning of the 1970s, there were significantly more design contests—for logos and posters—reported in local newspapers. These were open to the public and one could win a few hundred dollars for giving an entity a "modern" identity. For instance, the top prize for a contest to find a logo for the new National Stadium in 1972 was S$600. This wage, when adjusted for inflation today, would be about S$2,000. Along with these contests also came media coverage on the winning logos and their rationale. This became means of educating the masses to read design as "modern".
Two newspaper articles from this period also suggest how new logos and corporate identity were to the city then: "What's in a logo?" (1978) in New Nation [↗ eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Page/newnation19780521-1.1.10] and "New logos for 15 big organisations in '86" (1987) in The Straits Times [↗ eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Page/straitstimes19870126-1.1.13]. Both express ideas of how logos must be "international", "simple", "standardised" to reflect "efficiency" and "reliability". One example of logos being modernised is that for the Public Utilities Board, a government agency in charge of providing utilities. Its very literal 1965 logo—with a power station, gas holder and flowing water in a circle—by commercial artist Chew Man Cheong was replaced in 1977 by Eulindra Lim's streamlined logo that was described as more "modern".
The popularisation of "modern" logos also coincided with the rise of the professional design consultant in Singapore then. News reports often quoted William Lee, a local graphic designer who studied and work in Australia, Holland, and the UK before returning to start Central Design in 1969. He designed many prominent Singapore logos that still are in use today, including the Post Office Savings Bank (1972) and Shangri-La Hotel (1975). Other logo designers and branding consultants who gained prominence in the 1990s include Su Yeang, whose firm designed the logo for the World Trade Organisation and also packaged Tiger Beer for decades. Finally, there was Berwin See, who was hailed as Singapore's "Logo King" when he passed away in 2009.
The rise of these consultants were supported by several wider contexts. In 1985, a non-government organisation, the Designers Association Singapore, was established to champion professional design. Soon after, the government also began offering generous subsidies to local businesses to use design to create more attractive goods for export. Finally, the Singapore government also began spinning off many of its services into

corporations in a neoliberal turn. This resulted in many opportunities for designers to design corporate identities and logos.

What value do you think design history has in practice? As a lecturer who teaches this subject to young designers, I've always felt a need to justify my course. I'm interested to hear from the perspective of someone like you who has gone through Singapore's design education system.

GJ Many would have said something like this before: it is difficult to progress without knowing where we've went. In the same way, it is difficult to practice design without knowing its "history" (in its broadest definition), since design is the activity of developing what exist and not only reproducing what has been done before. An understanding of the "past"—in the ways described earlier—is important for us to reimagine futures. Paradoxically, "history" is almost synonymous with "progression".
Ideally, there should not be too much division between studying history and developing practice; approaching the design of anything benefits from knowing the history of its related archetypes and relevant contexts. Similarly, investigating the history of any designed object will benefit from practical knowledge in design. For instance, knowledge and experience with specific print processes and production is necessary when studying printed artefacts belonging to the same technological period. Yet, Singapore's design education system, which is the only place we've both studied in so far, seems to divide the studying of history (or more generally, theory) and developing a practice (this might also be the case elsewhere). Some even treat the former as mere accompanying knowledge similar to "technical studies" or "software skills" when they arrange it into a "neat" module of the same duration. It becomes even more problematic when the contents lack local/regional perspectives or contents.
With such a division, it is tricky to communicate the role of history in practice beyond verbal description into actual application and experience in the studio/classroom. Any effort to "justify" its importance is really a business of persuasion and if successful, students will still have to identify, explore and draw the connections between specific parts of history to their own interests in practice. I must also say that our practice benefits from this situation as we are interested in creating tools or spaces for self-education. One example of this is the book and this installation, which prompt further investigation on the subject through modes of engagement different from the archives. But all this is only made possible because of the archives' existence in the first place. Without it, we will likely not be aware of these "histories", much less a potentially contextually-aware design practice. In this sense, I provide a tautological response: the value of design history is dependent on how much practitioners value it and how much it is "applied" in practice.

Have you considered the value of this archive beyond Singapore? Are there specific connections there might be to other graphic design related studies or histories outside of Singapore, whether regionally or internationally?

JZ The archives offers another viewpoint to design history which has been overwhelmingly dominated by a Western narrative. This is one thing that has come clear to me after writing a series of features on graphic design archives around the world—Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia and Russia—for the American Institute of Graphic Arts' Eye on Design. These archives challenge

the idea that only design from Europe and the United States is worthy of recording. If anything, there is a long history of design ideas traveling back and forth between countries through networks of people and media that we are only starting to uncover.
In Singapore, I would say the archives has thus far been seen as a curiosity (for the young) or with a tinge of nostalgia (for the old). I haven't had too many people approach the material critically. My sense is Singapore designers are more in tuned with the latest projects reported in places like Brand New, It's Nice That, Grafik and Eye on Design. They are after all looking for "inspiration" to help do their work, which the archives is not about. That said, we do see our archive as a means of spurring "better" work. Most of the time, the public does not see a piece of design as the work of an individual or team of people and the local media today hardly discusses such issues nor even name who is behind a design. By making public the people responsible for a piece of design and their ideas for it, the practice of design becomes more visible and transparent. Hopefully, this encourages discussions about how we as a society want to use design.

— October 2018

Visit the archives at ↗ graphic.sg