Architect of the SMU half years working on the project and realised the boxes. And after speaking to Tan Teck Kiam, Principal Architect of KNTA Architects, who has spent five and a half years working on the project and still sees it as a work in progress, this writer realised this was, and is, a labour of love.

When a project is people-driven rather than building-driven - which would demand an iconic building - then it is all about space," he explains. "Our starting point was an analysis of the site with reference to the history of the city, how a city evolves and how buildings in cities play a relevant role."

KNTA was established in 1993. In addition to the many interior projects in Singapore, it has also worked on projects in Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Sydney, Melbourne, Seattle and Hong Kong.

In 2000, in collaboration with Edward Cullinan Architects/UK, KNTA hit the jackpot, winning from among more than one hundred entrants, the international competition for the design and construction of the SMU City Campus.

"The first thing we did was to establish an axis," explains Tan Teck Kiam. This meant establishing the surrounding buildings and landmarks including museums, Dhobi Ghaut and Fort Canning. A major consideration for the architectural team was that the campus buildings be linked. "The term we used was 'ribbon and beads,'" he says. "The 'beads' are actually the courtyards. The connecting spaces at both the street and concourse levels are perceived as the 'ribbons'..."

"The first storey in each building is as open as possible for both the public and students to use," Tan continues. "The University wanted to make sure that when the campus was built it did not drive the user or pedestrian to the side of the road but to allow them to use as much as possible the space at the first storey."

Consisting of five buildings at Bras Basah and one at Victoria Street, the SMU City Campus is spread over a large area. The character of all the spaces varies and is shaped differently. Because of their orientation and size, these buildings can house different kinds of activities, "therefore the linkage of the buildings becomes very important," according to Tan Teck Kiam.

Tan views the SMU campus as continuously evolving to suit students' needs. "I would like to see the situation where over time they start to adapt and change the use of the space. In the Business School we have an atrium and retractable roof - so there is quite a big open space where we can envisage a mini exhibition - an exhibition promoting courses, for example."

Facing Fort Canning, the open spaces of The School of Accountancy are more intimate and more suited to smaller activities like musical performances, while the Li Ka Shing Library fronts the Singapore Art Museum. In between is the top of the Bras Basah MRT - a reflective pool currently under construction. For Tan, "An axis has been established - these two buildings talk to each other."

The fourth building is the School of Information Systems and the campus centre where all the student societies are housed at the concourse level. Conscious of the needs of students to congregate and relax, the design includes a long flight of steps with benches and a performance area at its base.

The last building facing Hotel Rendezvous is the School of Economics and Social Sciences. Relatively open on the Bras Basah and Stamford Road side, Tan explains that, "As architects, we would like to see occasional weekend events like students or others setting up book exchange stalls, because Bras Basah Road was once a place well-known for second-hand bookshops."

At street level, the architectural nature of the SMU is quite porous - you can literally see from one side of Bras Basah Road right across to Fort Canning and Stamford Road.

Tan views the concourses as spaces in their own right - "rather than just as tunnels linking the different areas." With the long unadorned walls, these spaces would seem ideally suited for students to exercise their creativity whether with activities or wall murals. Intellectual graffiti, anyone?

"There is always that stature and presence, weight and rhythm."

Tan Teck Kiam
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All the buildings have a courtyard, apart from the School of Business, which has an internal atrium instead, for car parking space and to allow for the MRT. "But we still keep the idea of a courtyard for all five buildings. There is an understanding of local shop houses, which uses courtyards to bring in natural ventilation and light. It gives a building a sense of place and identity," explains Tan.

At the top two levels is a glass façade. "We wanted (these levels) to feel lighter," he explains, and they differ from the more substantial base of the buildings with the "drum" incasing the classrooms and a series of prominent columns. "The rhythm of the columns, I think, is important because we based it on our understanding of institutional buildings. There is always that stature and presence, weight and rhythm," says Tan Teck Kiam.

Another feature of the City Campus is that the buildings, rather than having a flat frontage, are set back, allowing for a greater traffic flow while also forming a space with the neighbouring trees. "It forms another layer, another level of urban space – a kind of shelter which we thought was important for a civic or institutional building in a city," says Tan.

When it came to the overall planning, there were two considerations to take into account – urban spaces and SMU academic spaces. "Like all institutions, there should be some segregation and some definition between public and SMU use," explains Tan. "So when you come into the lobby space the security becomes very very tight."

One of this writer’s personal recollections of student life was rooms with no windows – mole-like rooms with garish strip lighting. KNIA Architect has addressed this by creating "buildings in which as many rooms as possible enjoy natural light so you can sense a passage of time."

Another novel feature of the SMU City Campus is the abundance of benches and sitting areas in corridors or, as Tan Teck Kiam puts it, "open spaces for unplanned discussions for students to congregate in-between classes or to sit and converse. A lot of space is planned as 'incidental spaces' with the facility for white boards and notice boards that could be used spontaneously as discussion areas."

This idea is carried through to the faculty floor where spacious corridors allow for informal seating areas where lecturers can meet. "It was also a desire on the part of SMU for the lecturers to interact with each other," says Tan.

Apart from the seminar rooms and tiered classrooms of between 45 to 70 seats planned in a horseshoe shape, there are smaller rooms for projects or for group discussions and these rooms are very much like the ones this writer remembers in her student days – small and in some way soporific. In the UK recently, the concept of 'transparent' academic institutions where all the classrooms are open was initiated in some schools to a resounding success. SH wonders if this concept could have been implemented here?

As the British Architect James Cubitt once said, "Architecture is significant only in its response to specific needs." And the idea of an educational establishment like the SMU is one that can grow and adapt to new requirements is undoubtedly an exciting one.

"I feel I have painted a picture of what SMU wanted," says Tan Teck Kiam. "If never wanted to be like ‘Hey I am here’, rather ‘Hey, I am your friendly neighbour.’. Although a lot of people had very strong sentiments, it has relevance because this part of the city has always been a place for institutions.

"Personally, I felt that as an Architect who designs a building in the city, one should focus on how the space is used, particularly for this site," he continues, "rather than to create a pristine architectural statement. Because sometimes they are not mutually inclusive, they tend to be exclusive. A good city allows us to explore. A city must be multi-layered."

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