BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

It's no skyscraper, but Singapore's only city campus has fulfilled a tall design order.
By Evelyn Tan

If you think alienation has become part and parcel of city living, you could blame it on the architecture. "When tower blocks occupy a space in the city, people are cut off — the buildings' message is, 'Come in if you're a guest, otherwise, stay out,'" says Tan Teck Kim of Singapore's KNTA Architects.

It's a subject close to Tan's heart; six years ago, his practice — together with London-based Edward Cullinan Architects — won an international competition to design and build Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore's only city campus. Subsequently, the team set out on a mission to bring heart and soul back to the streets.

"We wanted to craft a space that people could use," says Tan. The solution: a design that called for a return to nature, where a walk through campus grounds would be akin to a stroll in the park. Embodying those ideals, SMU's buildings are, as a result, bathed in natural light, with open-air street level spaces, lush greenery and internal courtyards that set the stage for movement and human interaction among students, faculty members and the public.

The nature theme extends to the interiors, where woods dominate. The railings around the internal atrium are made of Nyatoh [a hard wood], while the doors and wall panels are finished in veneer beech and reconditioned oak respectively. "We chose the materials because of their simple lines and groins," says Tan. "The same principles applied for our choice of accessories, such as carpeting — the carpets we chose have simple lines and patterns we felt were consistent with our design principles, and we used them in the teaching rooms and corridors. We wanted elements that didn't overwhelm, but instead added to the natural feel of the space." Case in point, the choice of timeless, neutral
carpeting. The modern geometrics and textural but subtle earth tones of Furrows™ mirror a limestone slab floor. As a counterpoint, Tatami Fields™ – inspired by the Japanese tatami mat – with its subtle multicoloured band, lifts the overall effect.

History appears to have been another consideration, for the SMU buildings contain numerous references to the past. The campus is visually linked to historic buildings like the Singapore History Museum and the Singapore Art Museum, and two walls along one of its main concourse stairways bear red bricks from a now-demolished public library.

As for the present and future, Tan stresses that although he would characterise the buildings as contemporary, there was never any intention to put them forth as architectural fashion statements. "When we took on this design project, we didn’t start by saying, ‘We want an iconic building’ or ‘We want an ultra-modern building,’" he says. "I think the challenge is this: what would these buildings look like 15 or 20 years from now?"

The aim, therefore, was to project a sense of timelessness. “We wanted to present the university as one that works round-the-clock,” explains Tan. To achieve this, pelmet lights were installed behind the buildings' glass façade – bathed in a warm glow, the buildings come alive in the night.

In all, Tan is highly satisfied with the final result. “I think we’re definitely unique in Southeast Asia,” he says. “We wanted to create a place with its own reality, and our design is really a vision of how urban buildings in Singapore should be.”

Installer
Contrac Image