

MODERN

MEMORIES

REMEMBER THE
PLAYGROUNDS SINGAPORE
GROW UP IN

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INTRODUCTION

A brief history of Singapore's old playgrounds

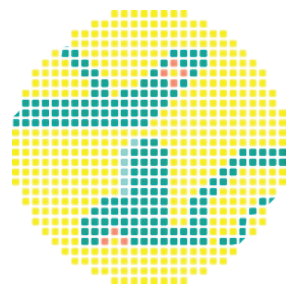
BY JUSTIN ZHUANG

Like many Singaporeans who grew up in the '80s and '90s, I spent my childhood having fun in the playground of my public housing estate. I never thought much about these spaces then, except how high I could reach on the rubber tyre swings, the thrill of spinning on a merry-go-round, what fun it was building sandcastles, and that time always flew by so quickly before my mother would usher me upstairs to do my homework.

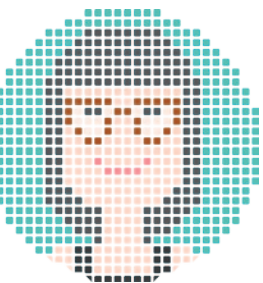
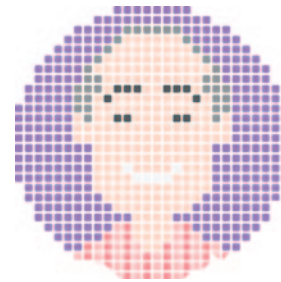
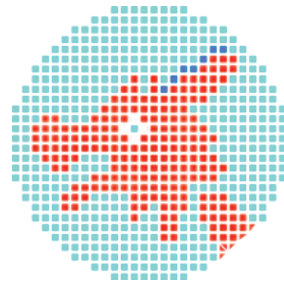
As I grew older, I sought play outside the playgrounds and it was only three years ago, at the age of 25, when I thought about them again. I had read a magazine article about play spaces around the world increasingly looking one and the same because of globalisation. When I went downstairs my block to check, I was horrified to find my childhood playground had also given way to one that looked like it came from halfway across the world! This sparked the start of my journey to find out if the playgrounds I grew up with are still standing in Singapore.

It turns out that the development of Singapore's public estate playgrounds mirror that of this nation. Children used to catch spiders, play with fighting fish and have fun in their kampung. It was only with the government's plan to house its citizens in modern high-rise flats that designated play spaces were built for children to have fun in a safe environment.

The early playgrounds were made up of functional equipment like swings, slides and see-saws created out of metal and timber. In the early '70s, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) assigned one of its staff, Mr Khor Ean Ghee, to design Singapore's very own playgrounds. Even though he had no experience, the interior designer, who had joined HDB to create landscapes for the estates, managed to come up with several designs in 1974 that featured static animal-sculptures like the pelican and rabbit alongside the typical swings, slides and merry-go-rounds.



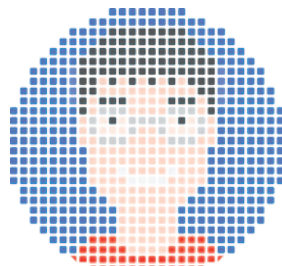
In 1979, reflecting HDB's plans to build better quality housing, five new playground designs were also introduced. Instead of static sculptures, playgrounds were now seen as 'mini adventurlands'. HDB also wanted to create spaces that could impress upon its young users a sense of Singapore's identity. This gave birth to the now iconic Dragon playground, an Asian symbol tamed and redesigned by Mr Khor for the children to play with. Over the next few years, other local icons like the bumboat and rickshaw also became inspirations for the designs.



After Mr Khor left the public service in the mid-80s, HDB continued to produce new playground designs for its public housing estate. In 1988, a new generation of playground designs based on children's play themes were introduced, including a colourful clock, an old woman's shoe house, fire engines and the fairytale character Humpty Dumpty. Some designs were also based on their locations, such as fruit-themed ones in

Choa Chu Kang New Town, once a farming area. Entering the '90s, playground designs began combining abstract shapes with popular culture, such as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle cartoon series, hoping to create an environment that appeals to children and encourage them to be inventive.

By 1993, HDB stopped designing its own playgrounds and

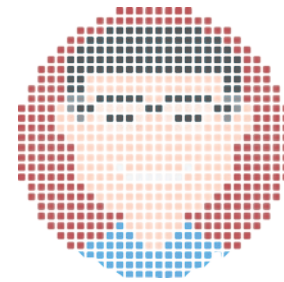


imported them from overseas suppliers instead. The high cost of producing and maintaining locally-designed playgrounds as well as new regulations to meet international safety standards made it easier to use what was available. Furthermore, after an incident at a poorly-maintained playground, there was an impetus to change the policy.



Over the next decade, HDB-designed playgrounds were one by one replaced by modular ones also used throughout the world. By the time I started my search, I found less than 20 old playgrounds remaining, many dilapidated and awaiting to be demolished. But I also discovered Singaporeans like me who were intrigued by these playgrounds. Many shared pictures of them online, and the most common response from others was: Where can I find this? That led me to to consolidate all these pictures and information into a Google Map to make it easy for others to find them.

In time, I realised this map of old playgrounds was also one of Singaporeans' memories. That is the idea behind this book commissioned by the Singapore Memory Project. Inside are four stories from Singaporeans whom I found while looking for old playgrounds: Mr Khor is the designer who created these spaces; Miss Antoinette Wong learnt about life through playing in them; Mr Fong Qi Wei developed his photography by using the playgrounds as subjects for 'light paintings'; and Mr Lim Chee Peng who sees these play spaces as an escape from the modern, bustling city of Singapore.



It is through their acts of remembering that make these playgrounds come alive. Just like the individual glass mosaic pieces that make up the old playgrounds, it is only when their stories come together that a collective memory is formed — and this is what makes the old playground a national icon of Singapore.



Space for a Nation to Imagine

The designs of old playgrounds helped shape
a generation's memory of Singapore

COURTESY HOUSING & DEVELOPMENT BOARD

PLAYGROUND PROTOTYPE

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PREVIOUS:
Architectural plans of the Dragon playground that Mr Khor drew up in the 1970s.

LEFT:
After designing the playgrounds, Mr Khor also had to 'play' at his creations to check that they were safe.

He had never designed a playground in his life, so when Mr Khor Ean Ghee was tasked to do so, he turned to his imagination for help.

The trunk of an elephant became a slide, the tip of a slice of watermelon was the pivot for a see-saw, but Mr Khor's personal favourite, amongst the over 30 playground designs he created for the Housing & Development Board (HDB), is his Dragon playground. He turned the fierce mythical animal in Chinese legends into a playful sculpture where children can run along its spine, slide down its head, or play using the ropes and tyre swings attached on to it.

By combining a variety of play elements with a majestic Asian symbol, the 77-year-old today says the Dragon playground design was his most successful attempt at carrying out the brief he was given in the late 1970s — to create spaces where children could play safely and learn about local identity.

Mr Khor first joined HDB in 1969 to design the landscapes of public housing estates. A few years later, despite having no knowledge how to, he was assigned to design playgrounds as well. He recalls there were very few playgrounds in Singapore then, only functional swings and slides. However, as the government built more and more high-rise flats to house Singaporeans, more playgrounds were needed for the young population growing up in these estates.

In his early designs, Mr Khor introduced animals like a giraffe, rabbit, tortoise and pelican alongside the typical collection of merry-go-rounds, swings and slides. In the late '70s, as public housing moved beyond function to emphasise quality and the need to suit local conditions, Mr Khor's playground designs evolved too.

"The thinking then was to have more local identity and themes. We wanted something different, designs that reflect what we see in Singapore," explains Mr Khor. He took inspiration from Singapore's culture and history, transforming the bumboat and rickshaw into play spaces for instance. The dragon was another example. "Asians can easily recognise dragons and phoenixes.

It was not easy to combine the play with the shape of a phoenix, but I could design a dragon playground that allows for climbing and sliding while still keeping its shape," he explains.

While many Singaporeans' memory of the Dragon playground probably resembles the one standing in Toa Payoh Lorong 6 today, Mr Khor reveals that this design was updated from an earlier one. The first version had a longer spine, a circular monkey bar instead of a slide, and a smaller metal head. Only one was built in Toa Payoh Town Garden in 1975.

"It was felt that the dragon was too long, and the metal head wasn't easy to fabricate. Plus, the estate managers were not happy that the colour of the dragon's head would fade over time," says Mr Khor. Acting on this feedback, he returned to the drawing board, and in 1979, the now iconic Dragon playground was introduced to the public. In place of a metal head was one created out of terrazzo and square glass tiles in one of these four colours: red, blue, orange and green.

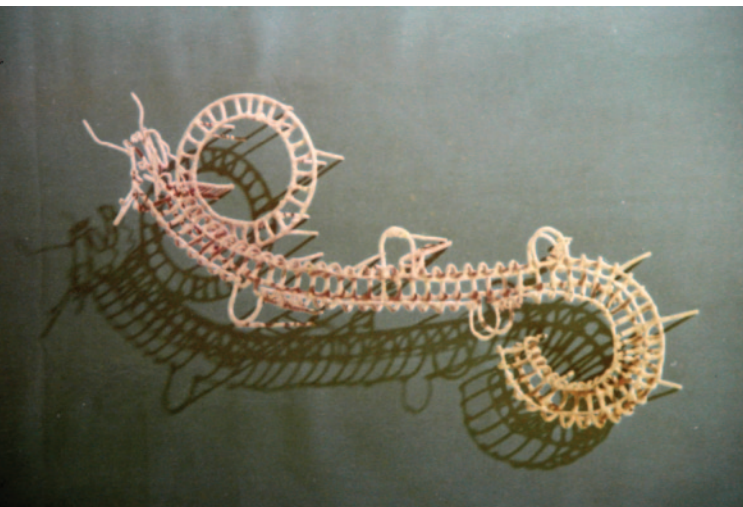
The tiles, which were also used in his other playground designs, gave the Dragon a unique mosaic look, but Mr Khor says he had decided to use them because there would be no need to



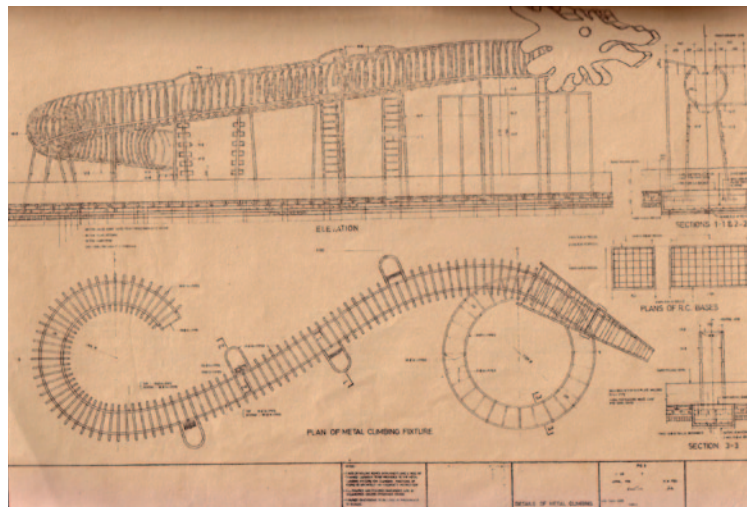
COURTESY KHOR EAN GHEE

LEFT:
The first version of the Dragon playground was built at Toa Payoh Town Garden in 1975. Only one was built, but it was eventually demolished to make way for a temporary bus terminus, says Mr Khor.

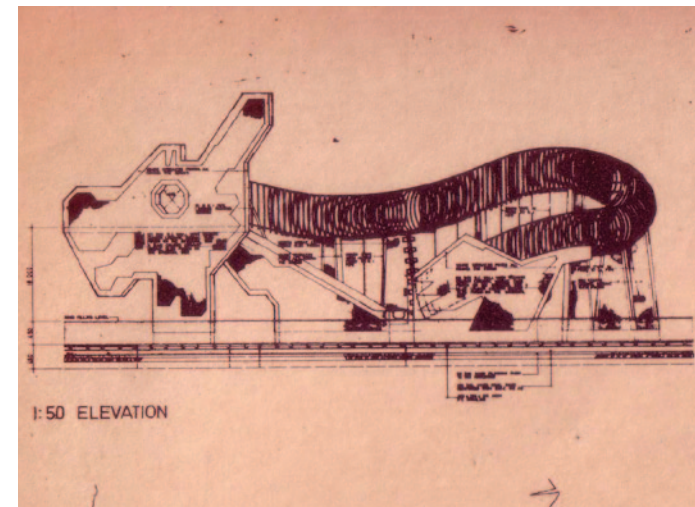
BOTTOM FROM LEFT:
A prototype model of the Dragon playground Mr Khor built; architectural plans for the first design of the Dragon; a detail from the architectural design for the second design.



COURTESY KHOR EAN GHEE



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give the playgrounds a fresh coat of paint annually — saving on the cost of maintenance. Till today, the playgrounds still look as colourful, just a little aged with time. The Dragon’s attractive design and maintenance-friendly feature made it a popular choice in the ‘80s amongst HDB’s architects who got to decide which playground design to install in public housing estates, says Mr Khor. In fact, because some spaces were too small to house the Dragon playground housed in a 10-metres by 10-metres sandbox, “Baby Dragons” modified from the original design were produced instead.

Today, you can only find the Dragon playground still standing in Toa Payoh and Ang Mo Kio. There are also two Baby Dragons existing, one in Braddell and the other in MacPherson. Despite the dragon’s near extinction, Mr Khor is not bothered, saying his design has served its time and purpose.

“Then we wanted identity, so the playgrounds were locally designed such that you can see this is a Singapore playground,” say Mr Khor. “Nowadays, it can’t be helped because Singapore is so small, it won’t be cheap to design it ourselves. The modern playgrounds are also of better quality because the companies that produce them keep improving on them.”

Since 1993, HDB has stopped designing its own playgrounds, and began replacing old playgrounds like the Dragon one with equipment imported from overseas. However, the Dragon playground continues to live on in other ways. In March 2010, it was featured on a series of ‘Playgrounds’ stamps, the only one of the old playground designs to do so. Mention old playgrounds to Singaporeans, and the Dragon design continues to be fondly remembered. Like dragons themselves, Mr Khor’s playground design has captured the imagination of the children who played on it, and it will continue to live on as a legend in Singapore. 🐉



TOP:
A Baby Dragon playground that is still standing along Pipit Road.

LEFT:
Coloured glass tiles were used in the second design of the Dragon playground so they need not be painted regularly, saving on maintenance. It also ended up giving the playground a unique mosaic look.

NEXT:
Mr Khor on top of the Dragon playground at Toa Payoh Lorong 6. It is one of two still standing, the other is in Ang Mo Kio.



Badges of Resilience

Old playgrounds taught a generation a thing or two about life

COURTESY LITTLE DROM STORE



PREVIOUS:
The four wearable
pin designs Miss
Wong (above)
created based on
the old playgrounds.

In this school, children are encouraged to run wild and have fun. They can climb, jump, swing and slide, and if they ever get hurt or fall down, it is okay. They just have to pick themselves up and learn from it.

Welcome to the 'School of Hard Knocks' — what Miss Antoinette Wong thinks old playgrounds are to her generation of Singaporeans.

"It was literally hard knocks playing here, if you fall down, you could get bruises and graze your knees," she says. "Compared to playgrounds now where everything is rubber and protected, we learnt through our failures then, it's all part of the process."

This is the lesson Miss Wong and her partner, Mr Stanley Tan, have been trying to preserve and pass on to other Singaporeans by bringing attention to these now forgotten playgrounds. In 2010, the duo exhibited their photographs of these spaces at public bus stops and at the Esplanade Tunnel as part of the M1 Fringe Festival. Since then, they created pins based on the playground designs and have been selling them at the little dröm store, a shop they run that sells vintage knick-knacks.

Says Miss Wong: "We wanted to create wearable art so as to preserve these playgrounds that are diminishing. When people wear these mini sculptures around, they become a trigger of memories for others."

Thus far, they have sold over 300 of these pins, which have often led to customers coming up to them to share memories of the playgrounds they grew up in or enquiries as to where to find them. But Miss Wong actually has few memories of the old playgrounds herself. The 28-year-old spent her childhood in a landed apartment and did not have many opportunities to play at such playgrounds that were only built in public housing estates. However, she remembers playing at these playgrounds every now and

then when the family went house visiting.

As a child, her favourite playground was the Dragon design. It was big and filled with equipment that the active child could climb on, including rubber tyre swings, ropes and ladders. In 2005, while working as a graphic designer, Miss Wong began spending her weekends exploring Singapore with her camera to seek inspiration. While checking out mature neighbourhoods for old school provision shops and spaces, she stumbled upon the old playgrounds, and discovered designs she had never seen before — including a new favourite, the Watermelon playground.

Miss Wong discovered it along Pipit Road while exploring MacPherson in 2008. "It was 'Wow, so conceptual', it's like James and the Giant Peach!," she says. "It brought out the child in me and I started playing around, sitting on the swing and going up and down the slide."

From that day of discovery, she also captured a series of photographs that later became part of her 2010 exhibition. To top it all, she also found a loose piece of glass tile from the playground to bring home as a keepsake. Looking at the playground from a designer's perspective now, Miss Wong is impressed with how a single glass tile was used to form the signature mosaic look of old playgrounds. Besides their graphic appeal, she also appreciates how symbols from Singapore's history and culture were used to form the playground designs. This taught the children who played in it something about Singapore, and also created unique spaces not found anywhere else in the world.

"There was so much thought in the designs. A watermelon design was used so that when kids play in the playground they can find out what is this fruit," she says. "We now talk about education outside the classroom and books, the playgrounds was such a starting point!"

However, many of today's children are missing out on learning through play in such spaces, says Miss Wong. Of the old



COURTESY ANTOINETTE WONG



TOP & FAR LEFT:
Pictures of the Watermelon playground snapped by Miss Wong in 2008 when she discovered this design for the first time in her life.

LEFT:
This pin created by Miss Wong is based on the design of the Watermelon playground.

playgrounds she found, most were not well-maintained and falling apart. Many have also been replaced by new and modern ones that emphasise safety because parents today are more protective of their children, she says. Old playgrounds with their sandpits and movable equipment, the things that children like most about playgrounds, are now regarded as dangerous. "Nowadays my relatives tell their kids not to do this or that because it's dangerous or its hot, but back then we just played. Fall down also never mind!" she laments.

For Miss Wong, the old playgrounds that still stand today continue to preserve the spirit of her generation. "These playgrounds represent the resilience that Singapore has shown as it grew from life in kampungs to public housing estates," she says. "We've gone through so much changes, but the playground is still standing tall, whether people appreciate it or not is another thing." 🧑

RIGHT:
One of the old playground's innovative touches that impressed the designer in Miss Wong was how the inside of a slice of watermelon was turned into a slide.



Where are Singapore's Old Playgrounds?

Here are the locations of some old playgrounds still standing today. Visit <http://g.co/maps/hcn8g> for more!

PELICAN + RABBIT + TORTOISE PLAYGROUND
Behind Block 35 Vocational Drive. One of the first designs created locally by Mr Khor Ean Ghee in 1974.

CLOCK PLAYGROUND
Next to Blk 176, Boon Lay Avenue. The design introduced in 1988 is inspired by childhood themes.

KAMPUNG PLAYGROUND
Inside Woodlands Garden. Designed to resemble the wooden huts that people in Singapore used to live in.

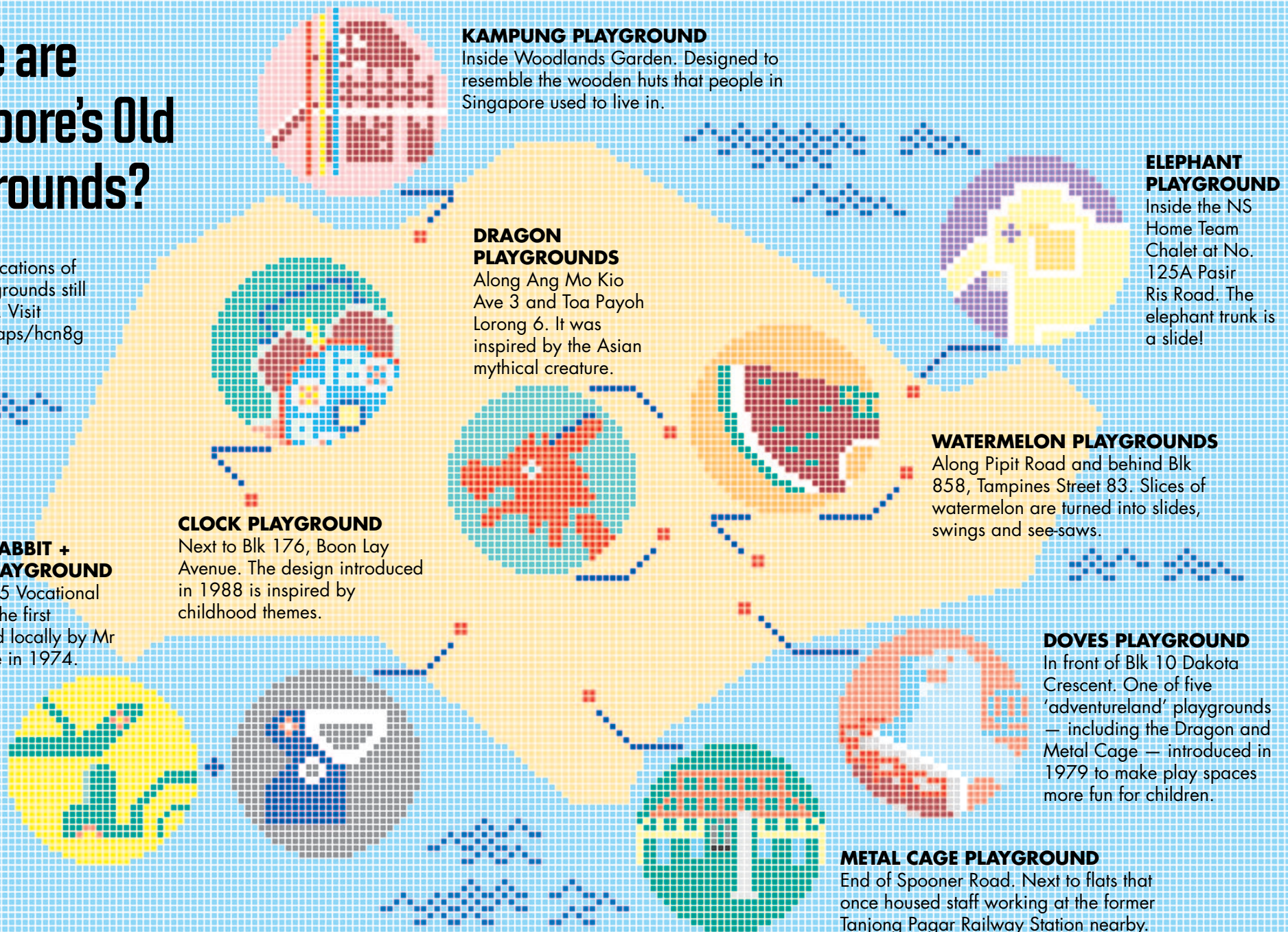
DRAGON PLAYGROUNDS
Along Ang Mo Kio Ave 3 and Toa Payoh Lorong 6. It was inspired by the Asian mythical creature.

WATERMELON PLAYGROUNDS
Along Pipit Road and behind Blk 858, Tampines Street 83. Slices of watermelon are turned into slides, swings and see-saws.

DOVES PLAYGROUND
In front of Blk 10 Dakota Crescent. One of five 'adventureland' playgrounds — including the Dragon and Metal Cage — introduced in 1979 to make play spaces more fun for children.

METAL CAGE PLAYGROUND
End of Spooner Road. Next to flats that once housed staff working at the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station nearby.

ELEPHANT PLAYGROUND
Inside the NS Home Team Chalet at No. 125A Pasir Ris Road. The elephant trunk is a slide!





Where We Escape from the City

Old playgrounds bring him to neighbourhoods that remind him of the good old days

Growing up in a cramped one-room flat with his two siblings and parents, Mr Lim Chee Peng always looked forward to hanging out at the playground downstairs instead. There, he could escape from school work and run wild on a dragon or go again and again round the merry-go-round.

So last year, when he discovered a map online of old playgrounds that are still standing, the 37-year-old decided to check them out and relive his childhood.

"I wanted to see the Watermelon playground because I had never seen it before. I didn't know there was a slide through it!" says the business and information technology consultant.

Over several weekends, Mr Lim visited the Dragon playground near his home in Ang Mo Kio, discovered the Watermelon and Baby Dragon playgrounds along Pipit Road, and also saw the Doves playground in Dakota Crescent. His trips to the playground as a child were accompanied by his elder brother and younger sister, but this time around, Mr Lim brought along his wife and two daughters — four-year-old Kimberly and six-year-old Kristen.



TOP:
A young Mr Lim (middle) playing with his younger sister and elder brother at the Dragon playground near his home in Bendemeer.

Together, the family of four would check out the playgrounds and its various features. "They will ask me to follow them when they try out some of the swings and slides for the first time," he said of his two daughters. "But some of the things only they can play. I can't fit the rubber tyre anymore, so I can only watch them having fun."

He may have outgrown the playgrounds, but Mr Lim found himself right at home in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Many reminded him of the public housing estate in Bendemeer where he spent the first ten years of his life before moving out. "The old playgrounds became an entry point to older neighbourhoods," he said.

RIGHT:
Mr Lim with his wife Wai Shim, and two daughters, Kimberly and Kristen, in the Doves playground at Dakota Crescent.





For instance, at the Dakota Crescent estate, where the Doves playground is, are apartment blocks no taller than seven-stories. The design of the block down to the buttons in the lift haven't changed from those in Mr Lim's memories. "Here, residents have stayed for a longer time, and even the shops are not faceless franchises," says Mr Lim. "Nearby, there is a retro provision shop and it's stocked up in its own idiosyncratic way."

That old playgrounds still standing today are usually found in mature estates is no coincidence. The Housing & Development Board stopped building and designing its own playgrounds in the '90s and began replacing existing ones with modern designs from overseas. The close to 20 old playgrounds still standing today have been accidentally preserved as part of estates that have undergone fewer development or are awaiting to be demolished. As a result, these playgrounds are showing their age after so many years.

This is a pity, says Mr Lim, who believes the playgrounds are

TOP & RIGHT:
A young Mr Lim in the Dragon playground. His four-year-old daughter Kimberley playing in the Doves playground.





Mr Lim's six-year-old daughter Kristen on a rubber tyre swing at the Doves playground, one of the few they've visited as a family.

iconic markers for a neighbourhood as many of the flat designs look more or less the same. As the playground designs were catered to local needs and conditions, they are also unique as compared to the cookie-cutter ones brought in from overseas.

More importantly, playgrounds can become social spaces, he says. While watching his children play when they visited the different playgrounds, Mr Lim found himself naturally seating around the raised platform that makes up the sandbox. "I'm not sure if this was intended in the design, but it becomes a place for parents and caretakers to sit around and catch up with one another. The experience then becomes not only for kids but also for parents," he says, though he noted that the old playgrounds they visited were mostly empty. Play spaces nowadays don't have enough seating areas, he adds, "It's important for people to be able to sit and watch, so it's not just a place to keep kids in but also a place to bring a community together."

For the father of two, the old playgrounds also hold something for his future generation. His children may not be able to tell the difference, but Mr Lim says newer playground designs over-emphasise on safety. Many of them no longer have sandboxes because it is deemed to be hard to maintain, but his daughters love playing with them and it's probably because of the tactile quality and the endless possibilities they can create, he says.

The desire to experience the outdoors is one of the reasons why the Lims spend most of their weekends at parks and playgrounds. While many Singaporean families flock to shopping malls, Mr Lim prefers to spend time with his family outdoors where it is more relaxing. "We can spend time together without having to worry about our kids being trampled by other kids and there is no congestion," he says.

Like how the playground was an escape from a small and cramped apartment for the young Mr Lim, it continues today to provide respite for him — and his family — from life in the dense and built-up city Singapore has become. 🇸🇬





Lighting Up Memories

He re-discovers the past and finds inspiration for the future in his childhood playground



COURTESY FONG QI WEI

It was close to midnight, but the man was still having fun at the playground. As Mr Fong Qi Wei ran around the swing, see-saw and slide of the watermelon-shaped playground at Pipit Road, three young men came up to him.

“Are you taking pictures of ghosts?” he recalls one of them asking.

To the relief of both parties, Mr Fong was not capturing images of the dead and the men were simply curious why a man was shooting pictures of the playground in the middle of the night. “I was worried for my safety and my camera,” he says. “They had looked at my camera’s LCD screen, saw white light around the playground and thought that it was a ghost!”

The white light was actually Mr Fong’s ‘paint’, and he was using the technique of ‘light painting’ to bring alive the old Watermelon playground in his picture. Over a period of five months, the photo enthusiast visited seven of these old playgrounds across Singapore in the dark of the night, using just his camera and a torch light to capture a series of photographs showcasing them in a different light.

The series began when Mr Fong discovered light painting last year. He had been pursuing photography as a hobby for over a decade when he came across this photography technique where light is used to illuminate parts of a scene to create unique pictures when captured on a camera. While searching for a suitable subject to try out this technique, Mr Fong chanced upon a map online of old playgrounds in Singapore and decided that these fading spaces needed a fresh coat of ‘light paint’.

“Usually you’ll only notice a playground in the day and not at night, and I thought that light painting makes these playgrounds look playful even at night,” he explained. “There’s also something imaginative about lighting the space this way, which is what playgrounds are about, a space to imagine.”

After work one evening, the doctor headed to the playground in Dover Close, the most accessible one on his journey home. As he stepped into the playground with a pelican, rabbit and

PREVIOUS:
Mr Fong’s first light painting was at the Pelican playground where he grew up in.

RIGHT:
As a kid, Mr Fong found the playground’s static objects such as this pelican boring, but he now thinks they are iconic markers of his generation’s memories.



tortoise, it struck Mr Fong that this was the same place he hung out at after class while studying at the nearby Fairfield Methodist Primary School over two decades ago.

Back then, he would come to this playground in the public housing estate with a group of six to 10 friends after school to play and hang out. For about an hour or so, the children would play catching, "Police and Thief" and look for spiders around the playground, and the highlight for the boys was the play equipment.

"The main attraction was the merry-go-round and swings because you could get the thrill of moving fast," recalls the 33-year-old, pointing to what is now just a faded floor mark and a few rusty chains. "There was a big guy amongst us who will turn and turn the merry-go-round after everyone jumped on, and while it's spinning, we would try to jump off!"

For two hours that evening, Mr Fong played at this old haunt all

over again, running around to light up part of the playground and back to the camera to check that the image turned out as planned. Countless exposures later, Mr Fong got the pictures he would later merge to form his first light painting. For old time's sake, he even painted in the two missing swings. "It was tough because I am too short!" he says.

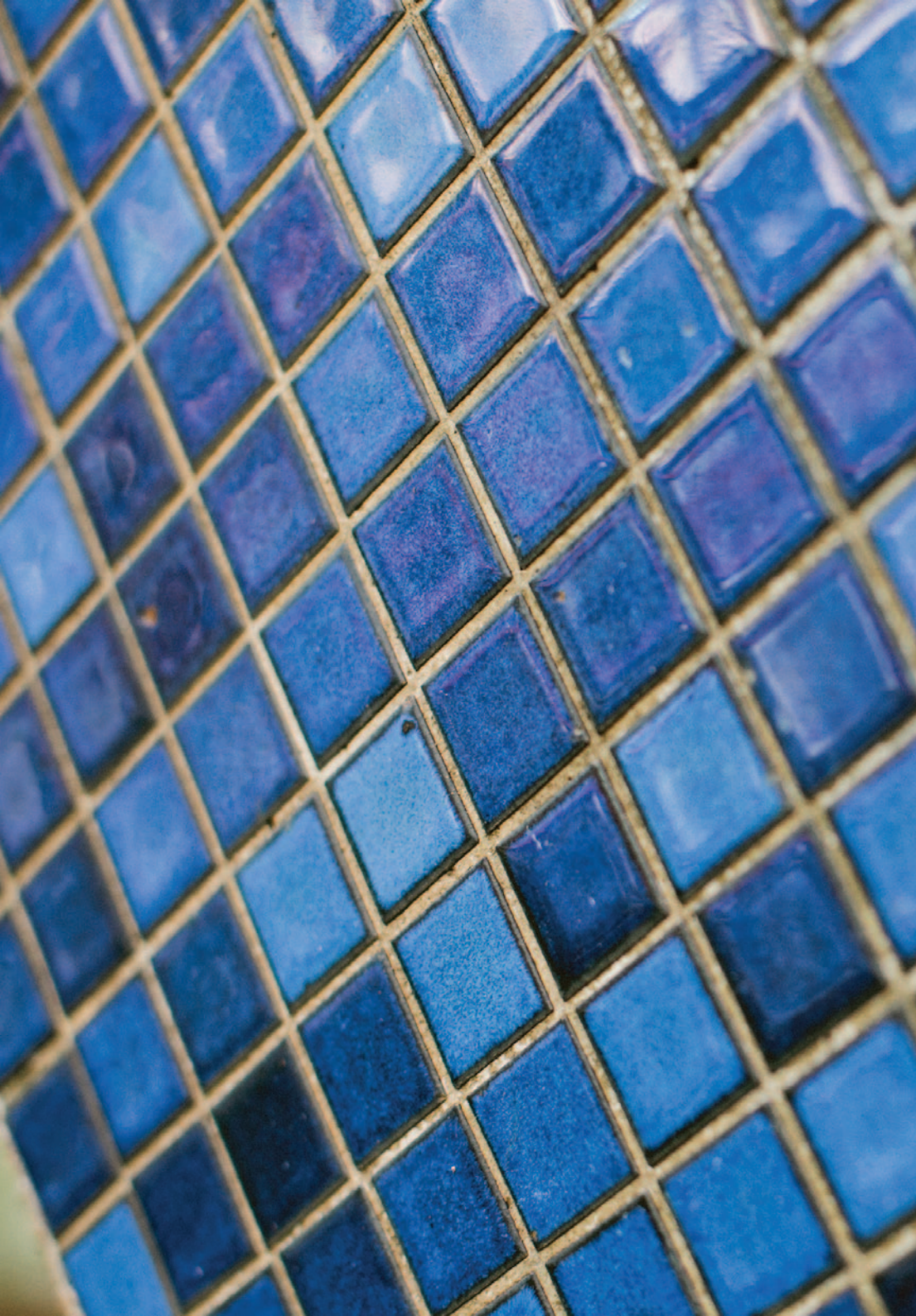
In his subsequent trips to other old playgrounds, Mr Fong brought his children to play there on the weekends so he could check out the site beforehand. When he was free on a weekday night, he would then return to the playground to paint. Working in this manner, Mr Fong discovered how he wanted to further develop his passion for photography. "This was the first coherent series of photographs that I did, and it helped me distill what I wanted to do," he says. "I want to use the digital photography process and do something traditional darkroom photography cannot do." Since shooting the playgrounds, Mr Fong has gone on to create other series of conceptual photography, and recently, several of his playground light paintings won accolades

BOTTOM:

These light paintings were created at the Bumboat playground outside Elias Mall and the Elephant playground inside the NS Team Chalet at Pasir Ris Park.



COURTESY FONG QI WEI



from an international photography award.

Mr Fong's seven pictures have also received many responses after he put them online on his website. Often, people who saw the paintings were reminded of their childhood and would share memories of what it was like growing up in Singapore — just like how Mr Fong felt when he first saw the Pelican playground again, years after spending his last day of Primary Six there with his friends.

The old playgrounds have become a collective memory for Singaporeans because they were unique in their

TOP:


A pelican, rabbit and tortoise were part of a playground design first drew up in 1974 by Mr Khor Ean Ghee. It was known to HDB architects as "PG Type C".

LEFT:

Detail of the blue glass tiles used on the pelican statue in the playground.

designs, he says. "I'm not sure whether the new playgrounds will have the same effect, because they all look the same," he says. "If you imagine another fifty years from now, and we show a picture of today's playground to our children, will they be able to recognise it as the one in which they grew up in?"

Today, most of the old playgrounds have been replaced, and the remaining ones are counting down their final days. The Pelican playground now sits serenely in an emptied housing estate awaiting to be redeveloped. The only sign of life are the mosquitoes that now infest the playground. Mr Fong, however, hopes the playground can be preserved beyond just in his pictures.

"We conserve the old Parliament House and the Supreme Court, but most of us don't see these buildings everyday," he says. "The playground is a space close to people, and it means something to Singaporeans because we grew up with them." 

thank you

This book would not have been possible without the kind assistance of Mr Khor, Miss Wong, Mr Lim and Mr Fong. Thank you for taking the time to share with us your memories and pictures.

Thank you also to the Housing & Development Board for letting us publish the architectural plans of the playgrounds.

Finally, thank you to the Singapore Memory Project for commissioning this book and letting us put together this tribute to Singapore's old playgrounds.



Contribute your memories at
www.SingaporeMemory.sg.