

Dear Friend vol 5
July 20 2019, Singapore

Written by Justin Zhuang

Designed by Ott Kagovere

Edited by Rachel Kinbar

Photo of Viita chair by Hugo Passos at Fiskars Village in Finland and see-saw swing at Pärnu beach in Estonia

Concept by Sandra Nuut & Ott Kagovere

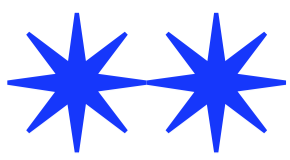
Title font Cap Sizun by Eva Rank

Text font Kirjatehnika Sans by Andree Paat

Published by Estonian Academy of Arts, Department of Graphic Design

Thanks to Indrek Sirkel





DEAR FRIEND,

It has been two weeks since

I returned to tropical Singapore. The sweltering heat outside makes me yearn for the cooler weather during my recent trip to Tallinn,

PRINCIPLES

Copenhagen and Helsinki. More than comfort, I find that living with the seasons makes one more sensitive to the environment. The daily need to respond to the weather – be it making plans or dressing accordingly – reminds us of how we relate to nature. But weather along the equator is significantly less drastic. In fact, I used to think we had no seasons until I attended a discussion on produce in Singapore last week. One of the chefs reminded us that different species of fish thrive in the seas around our island depending on the time of the year. But as few of us cook and shop in supermarkets selling only imported produce, we have lost such knowledge of how nature works.

FRICTION

I suppose this is why we call Singapore an “air-conditioned nation”. The air-conditioner is indeed ubiquitous here, offering a convenient practical solution for living comfortably in the tropics. Have you seen our newest attraction, Jewel Changi Airport? It is an air-conditioned shopping mall with a forest inside – how apt! But the connection is not just literal. Consider how the air-conditioner produces comfort by sealing up a space, such that the climate becomes forgotten. It is the perfect metaphor for how modern Singapore works.

CREATIVE CITIES

This reminds me of how Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley described modern design in their 2016 book, *Are We Human?* “Good design is an anesthetic. The smooth surfaces of modern design eliminate friction, removing bodily and psychological sensation.” Indeed, much of design in Singapore (and the world) is fixated on “problem solving” and ignorant of its impact on the human. As my recent credit card bill from the trip will attest, tech companies’ pursuit of “seamless” experiences, often by reducing “friction” in our interactions with their products, comes at a cost. *My* cost! Tapping away through purchases, and the confusion of different currencies, I quickly lost track of my spending. So much for being “user-centred”; what they probably care about is “*consumer*-centred” design!

DEATH

In contrast, I was delighted to have discovered Helsinki’s new Oodi Library. The architecture and interiors are beautiful. Plus, its impressive how this library has gone beyond books, offering access to production tools and multimedia facilities. But the most impressive feature is an A4-sheet found everywhere in Oodi. On it, the library outlines four principles – equality, respect, comfort, and promise – to ensure this “shared living room” lives up the promise that “Oodi is for all of us”. A simple set of parameters to create an inclusive public space. Typically, one expects rules that clearly state permissible activities and behaviour. But Oodi has left it to its users to figure out how to abide by its principles to achieve the desired outcome. Although rules remove ambiguity, the only responses are to abide or ignore them. Principles, however, offer space for different responses which can be negotiated based

HUMAN

on different contexts. Behaviour that is acceptable to the youth may irk the elderly, but should one group prevail over the other all the time?

Creating space for such “human agency” was most striking while in Tallinn when I learnt how an ex-squat was turned into the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, as well as how the neighbouring Lagemik bookstore was once a garage. I am probably romanticising the efforts, but the notion of a community building something for themselves and staying independent is precious. Especially when art and design is increasingly being co-opted by governments and corporations for their own political and economic ends. Through my travels, I found myself exploring each destination’s “creative city”, what has become a template for organising culture for the tourist gaze. From Tallinn’s Telliskivi Creative City to Design District Helsinki, and, to some extent, Copenhagen’s Kødbyen, I was struck by how similar they were. Cafés serving speciality coffee. Restaurants inspired by local produce. Shops selling national design and craft goods. All located inside former industrial buildings. While artists, designers and craftsmen now have a prominent place in the city, the danger is they are increasingly detached from the everyday life of citizens. Much of the goods and services on display essentialised the cities’ diverse cultures and made sense only for tourists. This was particularly so in Helsinki and Copenhagen where “Finnish design” and “Danish design” seemed dominated by the works of a handful of heritage brands and famous (dead) designers. Perhaps this was a testimony of their “timeless” designs, but can any work be truly independent of its time?

I began writing to you several days after protestors stormed Hong Kong’s legislative building on 1 July. Armed with just hard hats, goggles, umbrellas, and face masks, the mostly young protestors broke down the building’s steel shutters and glass windows using whatever was on the streets. It was an amazing display of creativity, although no government is going to showcase such acts in their “creative city”. While it was terrifying to watch live news feeds of the protestors storming and then vandalising the building, there were glimmers of hope. I later read that the building’s library was untouched and some protestors even left money in the fridge for the soda they drank.

In retrospect, the protest offers us an opportunity to rethink design amidst rising inequality. Instead of thinking “design = creation”, we must consider the opposite, death, too. This means solving problems by taking things apart and removing barriers in a way that will not leave a trail of debris and despair. It also means remembering death is natural in design and considering how a product or a building changes with time and nature. Rather than creating designs that work via restrictions (aka an “air-conditioned nation”), it should be open to evolution with people and the times. Sure, such designs will be less comfortable, but sometimes, a little sweat is what will remind us that we are human.

REGARDS, JZ