

PASSAGE

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From Godown to Gallery

Singapore Tyler Print Institute

By Laura Bales



Robertson Quay and Pulau Saigon Footbridge in 1974; photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

A world class professional gallery, printmaking workshop and leading paper mill that hosts a half dozen internationally known artists each year, the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) is located in a beautifully renovated conservation building in Robertson Quay, a trendy nightspot along the picturesque Singapore River.

The building we see now, however, is very different from how it started: six small godowns, or warehouses, originally built in 1927 and used to store rice and grains, then later, a decrepit, unused building alongside a stinking, polluted river. Surely more suited for a wrecking ball than an international centre for printmaking.

However, in the mid 1990s, along came Ken Tyler, a master printer who had worked with many of the 20th century's

greatest artists, including David Hockney, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol. He provided them with a workshop atmosphere that celebrated creativity and collaboration, allowing them to produce some of their finest work.

After a long, successful career, Tyler was ready to retire and searched for a new overseas home for his studio and printing presses. He initially approached potential buyers in Japan, Australia and, in Singapore, LaSalle College of the Arts. Brother Joseph McNally (founder and President Emeritus of LaSalle) and Alan Rubenstein (head of LaSalle) liked the idea and proposed it to the National Arts Council. The timing was good: Singapore had just adopted the 'Renaissance Plan'



Ken Tyler and others at work at STPI; photo courtesy of STPI



Robertson Quay in 1955; photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

for Singapore as a City for the Arts. Eventually the Cabinet agreed to allocate S\$30 million for the project: one-third to purchase and ship Tyler's workshop equipment from New York; one-third to renovate a building to house the institute; and the rest on 1,500 prints from the Tyler collection, now managed by the Singapore Art Museum.

The Robertson Quay site was made available to STPI under The National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme, inaugurated in 1985 to provide affordable spaces to arts groups and artists. Theatre Works also occupies part of the redone building and a restaurant rents space facing the river.

In 2001 the old warehouses were gutted and rebuilt to museum-quality standards. The Public Works Department was the primary consultant for the building, while Tyler did much of the engineering and design work.

As a conservation site, many of the skeletal components and the façade of the structure had to be maintained. The walls, however, had to be reconstructed and it was at that time that Tyler's equipment, including the 500-tonne press known as 'the elephant', was moved into the first-floor workshop.

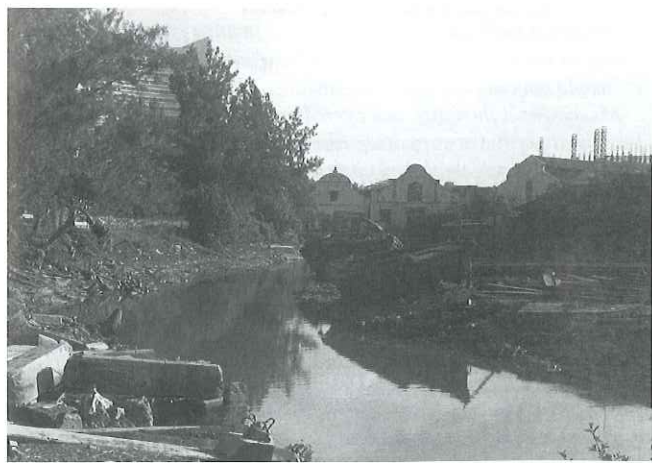
STPI occupies 4,000 square metres on four levels. Level one has Tyler's custom-designed presses and equipment and the largest paper mill in Asia, dedicated to producing handmade, conservation-standard paper in the Western tradition. Level two provides space for a 400-square-metre gallery, an audio-visual room, a guest workshop, studio space with natural light for visiting artists and staff offices. Additional offices are on the third level, while level four has an apartment used by visiting artists during their residency.

STPI was officially opened in April 2002 by Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan. To show the extraordinary possibilities of the collaborative process, the inaugural show featured artist Frank Stella's work, produced at Tyler Graphics.

Nearly a decade later, STPI carries on the masterful, boundary-pushing technical and artistic tradition exemplified by the Tyler name while drawing on, developing and promoting the vast, unique artistic resources of Asia.

Laura Bales was managing editor of *PASSAGE* and has lived in Singapore for three years. She has been a member of FOM almost as long.

Special thanks to STPI staff and docents for providing research materials



Behind Robertson Quay in 1974; photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore



The 'elephant', a 500-tonne press, being installed; photo courtesy of STPI



Robertson Quay in 1974, on the banks of a polluted Singapore River; photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Memories of STPI

Emi Eu, Director, Singapore Tyler Print Institute:

"Coming on board STPI and seeing Ken Tyler's presses from Mount Kisco being installed in the building was a poignant experience. These presses, once used by great artists such as Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and David Hockney to create exceptional works on paper, continue to push our legacy of printmaking to new heights. As we approach our 10th year anniversary next year, it's very gratifying to see the inroads we are making internationally. STPI's artworks are widely collected by private and famous public collections such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Singapore Art Museum. Many groundbreaking contemporary artists who worked with us, most notably Chua Ek Kay (Singapore), Lin Tianmiao (China), Do Ho Suh (Korea), Agus Suwage (Indonesia), Tabaimo (Japan), Thukral & Tagra (India) Trenton Doyle Hancock and Teresita Fernandez (USA), find STPI's creative environment helps them go beyond their studio practice to produce fresh and challenging works. A true artistic laboratory, STPI is committed to presenting innovative programmes and bringing audiences closer to contemporary art."