



## Top 10 galleries, art studios and design shops in Singapore

Singapore is more than a city of gleaming shopping malls - it also has a vibrant contemporary arts scene. Archiwalks founder Fabian Lua picks out great galleries and design-led sights

Interview by Claire Knox  
The Guardian, Saturday 15 November 2014



Space, a contemporary furniture store, part of the restored conservation shophouses at Space Asia Hub

The tiny island state may be swathed in grand, gleaming architectural marvels and cavernous shopping malls, but scratch the surface and you'll find a hotbed of creativity. "Singapore is changing," says the affable Fabian Lua, born and bred on Singapore's history-rich east coast, a former plantation area full of Peranakan culture and pastel-hued prewar shophouses. Lua is the founder of Archiwalks, a set of "storytelling" walks through arty pockets of the city centre, such as Bugis, Kampong Glam and Bras Basah.



Fabian Lua

"For a long time Singapore has been such a practical society, but the way I'm seeing change right now is that there are more and more people doing impractical things. People are leaving finance and similar careers, and setting up printing studios, galleries and magazines – things not driven by a focus on money but by creativity and self-fulfilment."

Lua, a design obsessive, counts himself among them. He left a job as a pricing analyst at Singapore Airlines to become the general manager of Peatix Singapore, an independent ticketing platform, and also led art walks around Singapore's Tiong Bahru and Marina areas for [OH! Open House](#), a project placing artworks in people's homes and opening them up to the public. Here, he lists 10 spots to find the best of independent design in the Lion City.

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## National Design Centre

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Last year, Singapore's government announced an ambitious plan to position the city state as one of Asia's biggest cultural and artistic "ecosystems", injecting hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, scholarships, festivals and infrastructure for the arts community. More than 50 contemporary galleries, including the acclaimed [Singapore Art Museum](#), are thriving, while the success of the Singapore Biennale and [Art Stage Singapore](#) have bolstered this vision. In April, the National Design Centre opened its doors in the former St Anthony's Convent, a 120-year-old white art-deco gem, with a clutch of studios featuring exhibitions ranging from Japanese design to designing "food experiences". The centre also houses the country's Design Council and the airy boutique and cafe [Kapok](#). One quarter of the 100 niche brands on sale at this emporium are Singaporean, from Biro's menswear to the silky, draped dresses of Stolen and Saught's sleek scrap metal jewellery. "This could have been a standard museum but the point is you can explore local design in a more accessible form. The coffee is excellent here, and you're sitting on works of art," says Lua.

• Admission free, [designsingapore.org/NDC](https://designsingapore.org/NDC). Open daily 9am-9pm

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## Bras Basah

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Cat Socrates boutique

Lua spent much of his formative years sequestered away in the graphic-novel bookstores of this kitsch concrete complex – a labyrinth of art supply stores, printing shops, small galleries and bookstores. "I always stumble across the most unusual objects here – if you're a design obsessive, this a great place to check out. The building itself is unattractive but was historically important as a haven for bookworms and Chinese literature fans."

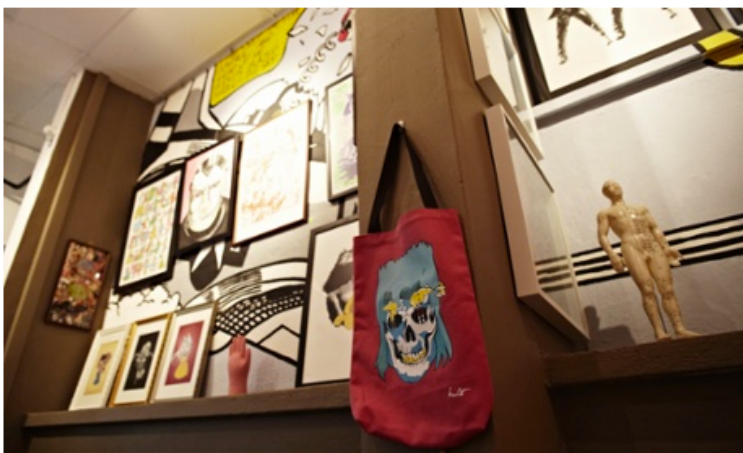
The area is within walking distance of many of Singapore's art schools and the complex has evolved to reflect their needs, Lua says. Part of his design education, he adds, was traipsing four floors up to [Basheer Graphic Books](#), a favourite haunt of Singapore's designers, illustrators, animators and architects, with a dizzying range of hard-to-find art and design literature, magazines and journals. Also inside the maze is [Art Commune studio and gallery](#), set up in 2009 by Ho Sou Ping, who left an aerospace engineering career to become an artist and curator. Swing by quirky boutique [Cat Socrates](#), just across from the gallery, for pretty stationery, badges, toys, printed dresses – much of it designed and made in Singapore.

• [bras-basah-complex.com.sg](http://bras-basah-complex.com.sg)

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## Emily Hill

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Kult 3D

Overlooking bustling Middle Road, this leafy hilltop was once home to Singapore's blue-blooded. Many of their grand mansions along Upper Wilkie Road have been torn down and replaced by slick condos, but in 2007 a committee of creatives formed to save and restore this colonial building into an arts hub. Lua lists [Kult 3D](#) – an “urban” street art gallery, shop and studio here – as one of the edgier design spots on the island. “These guys do really creative things in terms of illustration and graphic design and are champions of street art – which is not common in Singapore.” Kult also publishes a cool quarterly magazine under the same name. Along with exhibitions, Kult sells fun “Last Tango in Pasir Ris” calico tote bags and framed illustrations. Lua’s tip: be sure to check out [Wild Rocket's](#) innovative menu before you trek back down the hill.

- [kult.com.sg](#). Open Mon-Fri 11am-7pm, Sat 1pm-8pm

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### Space Asia Hub

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Revered Singaporean architects [WOHA](#) restored this set of conservation shophouses – formerly a bakery and a hotel – at 77 Bencoolen Street into a glorious example of how to blend the new and old. “The stunning original facades were resurrected sensitively, through lots of research by this team, juxtaposing with a modern glass structure. It’s brilliant and I love it. It houses [Space](#), a high-end, contemporary furniture store with designs from Australia and Asia. These kind of stores are usually in anonymous buildings, so it’s great to see fantastic designs housed in such a structure; it’s almost like a gallery,” says Lua.

- [spacefurniture.com.sg](#). Open daily 10.30am-8pm

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### Keepers

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In the middle of mall hub, Orchard Road is a shiny, onyx-coloured diamond showcasing some of Singapore's most exciting fashion designers and artisans. Over five months, a curated selection of more than 50 local Singaporeans' work is on display at [Keepers](#). Pick up exquisite headpieces by milliner [Heads of State](#); geometric, bold printed blouses and dresses from [In Good Company](#); silky, printed gowns by [Whole9Yards](#); and artisanal perfume by Code Deco. With an incongruous yet commanding locale, the pop-up has become a creative hub in the city; there are also workshops, designer Q&As and exhibitions that offer a glimpse into the creative process, along with pop-up restaurants, food trucks and more. "In terms of design stores and retail, I'm excited to see so much experimentation in Singapore. It's too much of a gamble for emerging designers and artists to invest in a year's rental in a [real estate] climate like Singapore's. Keepers are doing something bolder and it's exciting to see tourists and shoppers stumble into something so creative," Lua says.

• [keepers.com.sg](#). Open daily 11am-10pm

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## Tiong Bahru

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Books Actually

This sleepy neighbourhood was once a 1930s housing commission project, and is still full of low-rise art deco walk-ups with curvaceous balconies. Now independent boutiques and cool restaurants have proliferated. Lua rates Tiong Bahru's famed [Books Actually](#) as a top spot for vintage and nostalgia obsessives. "It has a huge selection of literature, but the owner, Kenny, has also created a backroom full of retro bric-a-brac. This guy is obsessed with collecting random junk and he's made a viable business out of it. Now it holds hugely popular markets, pop-up events and exhibitions," he says. Peruse an array of titles published under Books Actually's own publishing arm Math Paper Press, which has helped foster and uncover local emerging writers.

• [booksactually.com](#). Open Mon 11am-6pm, Tues-Fri 11am-9pm, Sat 10am-9pm, Sun 10am-6pm

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## School of the Arts (SOTA)

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The Little Dröm Store

Singapore's first pre-tertiary arts school is one of Lua's favourite structures in the city. "A large part of it is open to the public, like the concert hall. I love the cascading steps here. This is such a busy junction at the end of Orchard and people naturally hang out here. We have a lack of space in this city, so it's a clever way to create room," he says. Arty and eccentric, [The Little Dröm Store](#) recently relocated here from its Ann Siang Hill home, full of peculiar knick-knacks, retro toys, old cameras and idiosyncratic in-house products tied to Singapore. Owned by design and advertising experts Stanley Tan and Antoinette Wong, their "Strangely Singaporean & Proud Of It" badges have been a hit, as have the hawker-food inspired magnets. "Chope" is the Singlish phrase for reserving a seat in a hawker centre, usually by placing an object such as package of tissues on it. "I love the badges of the old Singapore playgrounds from the 1970s and 80s – these playgrounds were all wiped out, so it's a great statement of how things have changed," says Lua. • [thelittledromstore.com](http://thelittledromstore.com). Open Mon-Wed, Fri midday-8pm, Thurs midday-7pm, Sun 12.30pm-7pm

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## Art and architecture

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Gillman Barracks

"Part of my tours focus on conservation shop houses, which I am passionate about, too. I try to look at buildings that are unique to Singapore or suited to Singapore – low rise, great ventilation. Of course, they are no longer dominant because of the need here for density, but there are some fantastic examples of heritage buildings being renewed into art spaces. There's also lots of street art around Kampong Glam," he says. Just down the road from Kampong Gla is the [Aliwal Arts Centre](#),

the last stop of Lua's walking tour. "There are walls of ever-changing street art by the [RSCLS artist collective](#), who are based inside an art-deco building that used to house one of the earliest Chinese-immigrant girls schools in Singapore." [Gillman Barracks](#), spread over six hectares, is a 15-minute drive out of town and was part of a government-funded, \$8m restoration of the old 1930s army barracks. The colonial bungalows are now home to 17 galleries, such as New York's [Sundaram Tagore](#) and [Silverlens](#), along with the [Centre for Contemporary Art](#) and [FOST Gallery](#), which recently featured RSCLS artists.

• [gillmanbarracks.com](#), galleries have various opening times

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## Tan Boon Liat

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Journey East

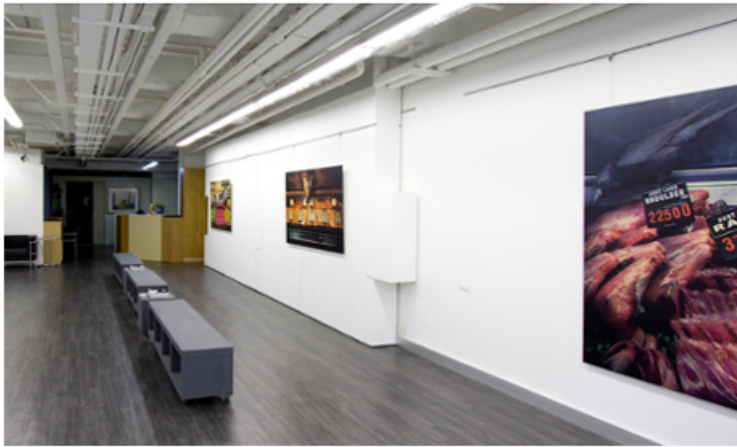
This gargantuan, worn-looking warehouse not far from Tiong Bahru is a hidden gem, Lua says, housing hundreds of furniture showrooms, outlets and antique shops. "[Journey East](#) produces striking reclaimed teak pieces that I haven't seen anywhere else. Inside this building, you'll find tonnes of treasures." Besides a range of vintage and upcycled furniture, Journey East also stocks sleek [District Eight Design](#) industrial furnishings, founded in 2010 by Singaporean-Australian Darren Chew in Ho Chi Minh City. "I also stop by [The Providore](#), another furniture warehouse that doubles as a deli with fine breads and pastries."

• [journeyeast.com](#). Open daily 11am-6pm, Sun 11.30am-6pm

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## Artrium at MCI

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"Most people don't realise it, but the iconic Old Hill Police Station, which later became the Ministry of Information, Culture and the Arts, is an excellent place to go shopping for artwork. It's such an attractive colonial building – its shuttered windows have been painted in a rainbow of colours – and its Clarke Quay location has long drawn people to photograph it. There is a bevy of galleries on the lower level and I love that they're all in the one place," says Lua. The buildings' original inner courtyards were preserved and now host installation art, cafes and performances underneath a glass atrium.

• [artriumatmci.com](http://artriumatmci.com), *Open every day*

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