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## REIMAGINING PRESCHOOL SPACES FOR THE FUTURE

*Lien Foundation and Lekker Architects conceptualise preschools in unusual and under-utilised spots in land-scarce Singapore*

1. Imagine a school near the water, with classrooms along the beach, on floating platforms or across a canal. Consider going back to basics with a classroom embraced by Mother Nature with lessons in a park, a farm or forest. What if void deck classrooms extend into a spacious field nearby or classes take place atop a multi-storey car park? These are possible preschools of the future.

2. The ideas are part of a Lien Foundation project – **A DIFFERENT CLASS: Preschool Spaces Redefined** – to cast a fresh eye on underused or overlooked spaces in Singapore where preschools could potentially be located. With some re-imagination, creativity and redefinition, Lekker Architects, a Singapore-based firm helmed by two graduates of Harvard University, has identified 10 types of locations. Each spot has attributes that can be harnessed for learning - so a preschool over a canal exposes children to the conservation of water while a classroom on the rooftop of a multi-storey car park allows children to see how air currents between high-rise blocks create energy.

### *Timely to reconsider preschool spaces and locations*

3. Studies have shown that the environment is a vital factor influencing a child's development. Researcher Karen Johnson<sup>1</sup> found that designing with an awareness of what the environment teaches and how it supports the developmental needs of children, together with a multi-sensory learning space results in higher achieving life

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, K. (2006) *Learning to learn: Pre-kindergarten-kindergarten design implications*. Scottsdale, AZ: Council of Educational Facility Planners, International.

long learners. In another study<sup>2</sup>, researchers found that the use of space fosters a child's exploration, independence and development. The use of space, colour, light and materials to create spatial quality, and the integration of the outdoor and indoor environment also greatly impacts a child's learning.

4. There is no better time than now to reconsider where preschools are located as the government is about to ramp up the building of 200 preschools by 2018 to meet demand. Lien Foundation chief executive officer Lee Poh Wah urged policy-makers to seize the window of opportunity to move away from cookie-cutter preschools, "We want to throw the spotlight on the homes of our essential social services like preschools. A preschool must be a great place to be a child, and to be with a child. Buildings and places with character also support the children's character development." Policy-makers can use these examples as a takeoff point to think about using space more creatively when considering where to locate preschools in the future.

***"Please, in my backyard" instead***

5. Referring to the recent announcement on the formation of the Municipal Services Office to coordinate between seven government agencies, Mr Lee said, "Could we extend the same whole-of-government approach to space planning of social services? These caring places and learning spaces need inspiring and attractive architecture to help turn the 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) syndrome into a 'please, in-my-backyard' (PIMBY) attitude. Our decisions in space allocation tacitly communicate our societal values, telling who and what is important."

6. Lekker Architects director Ong Ker-Shing added that potential use of land space could be lost because of cross agency boundaries or are simply overlooked. "Inspiring spaces are all around us but we often fail to notice them. Some, like highway buffers or large drains, are ignored because they appear marginal or infrastructural. Others such as public parks, beaches and waterways can seem

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<sup>2</sup> Berris, R & Miller, E. (2011). How design of physical environment impacts early learning: Educators and parents perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(4)

daunting because their use would require buy-in by multiple government bodies,” said Ms Ong. Throughout the project, conscious effort was taken to ensure such spaces exist across Singapore and are located where they can be connected to the community.

***Environment for learning is critical***

7. The senior principal of St James Church Kindergarten, Mrs Jacqueline Chung, who contributed ideas to the book, said prioritising space for early childhood education and maximising the potential of a preschool site will make all the difference in a child’s education. “There is a lot of emphasis on teacher quality and curriculum benchmarks but the environment provided for learning is just as critical. Physical environments create opportunities for exploration, learning through play and peer interaction, all of which play a part in a child's development of self-confidence, social skills and a sense of wonder,” she said.

8. The project aims to kickoff a conversation about spaces where preschools can be located. A book produced for this project will be distributed to government agencies and preschool leaders. A PDF copy of the book is available for download at [www.adifferentclass.sg](http://www.adifferentclass.sg). The public is invited to suggest new concepts and other possible locations for preschools. They can upload onto this website pictures of suitable locations. Prizes will be given for the best submissions.

***Make space for social services a key priority***

9. Prioritising spaces for early childhood education is just the beginning. Lien Foundation hopes the conversation will spiral upwards to eventually encourage a rethink of space for other social services, like those involving eldercare, such as senior activity centres, nursing homes and hospices. After all, conversations about physical spaces are intertwined with spaces in our hearts and minds. Inspiring new spaces must and can be found for them.

*See Annex for the 10 Preschool Spaces Redefined. Visuals available upon request.*

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## **About the Lien Foundation**

[www.lienfoundation.org](http://www.lienfoundation.org)

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called “Starting Well” that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education.

To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, “Vital Voices for Vital Years” that examined leaders’ views on improving Singapore’s preschool sector. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation’s efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has inspired a scaled-up national version in Singapore.






## **About Lekker Architects**

Lekker Architects is a Singapore-based practice specializing in buildings and environments. Co-founders Ong Ker-Shing and Joshua Comaroff began working together as Lekker Design in 2002, after studying architecture and landscape at Harvard University. Lekker Architects combines the specific requirements of the client with a range of ongoing explorations in geometry, material and detail, and in architectural meanings and typologies. These do not result in a signature style so much as a way of thinking about how the elements of a building might go together.




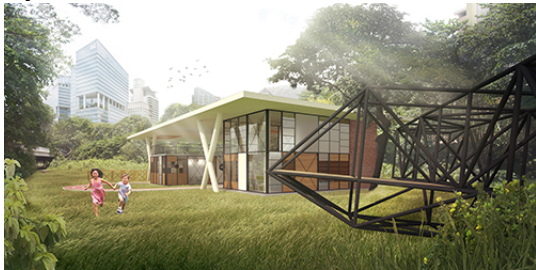

The firm’s range of clients comprises private individuals and firms, including Hermès, JTC, Eu Yan Sang and The Hour Glass. Institutional clients include Yale University-National University of Singapore, Singapore Biennale, The National Parks Board (NParks), in addition to many Singapore government agencies and councils.

Recent projects by Lekker Architects have included houses and landscapes, as well as master planning and furniture design. Ker-Shing and Joshua remain interested in research and writing projects, and the intersection of academia and practice. They have recently published a book of architectural history and theory. The study commissioned by the Lien Foundation to re-imagine ten preschool buildings for unusual sites is the first of its kind undertaken by Lekker.

## TEN PRESCHOOL SPACES REDEFINED

Concept	Possible Sites	Features
<p><b>Among the trees</b></p> 	<p>Road reserves near expressways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Between CTE and Tiong Poh Road</li> <li>▪ Between PIE and Tampines St 11</li> <li>▪ Between CTE, Braddell and Carmichael Road</li> </ul>	<p>Treehouses can be used for small class activities like singing or birdwatching, tree trunks are a natural setting for storytelling with canopy for shade</p>
<p><b>Within the campus</b></p> 	<p>At tertiary institutions like the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ NUS</li> <li>▪ NTU</li> <li>▪ ITE College East</li> </ul>	<p>Made up of modular systems with an emphasis on physical activity and exercise</p> <p>Merges learning and play with use of play frames, ladders, slides and bridges</p>
<p><b>Along the beach</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ East Coast Park near East Coast Lagoon</li> <li>▪ Pasir Ris Town Park near Orchid Bowl</li> <li>▪ Changi Beach Park near People's Association Adventure Club</li> </ul>	<p>Buildings are constructed to look like tents; sand-bed floor integrates interior and exterior environment; creation of a semi-outdoor space</p> <p>Special emphasis on tactile learning such as sand and water play; curriculum could focus on preserving marine life and coastal environments</p>
<p><b>Over the canal</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rochor Canal</li> <li>▪ Alexandra Canal</li> <li>▪ Ulu Pandan Canal</li> </ul>	<p>Classrooms have a column-free interior and allows for filtered natural light</p> <p>Features such as a water wheel can be built; exposes children to conservation of water; reclamation of the drain and hydro-power</p>
<p><b>Above the carpark</b></p> 	<p>Rooftops of multi-storey carparks in HDB estates at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bukit Panjang Ring Road</li> <li>▪ Skyville@Dawson, within planned roof gardens</li> <li>▪ Punggol Estate</li> </ul>	<p>A learning village consists of small houses with features like teepees, a hidden playground and curved flight of steps</p> <p>A wind-farming facility where children can discover wind processes</p>



<p><b>Across the lawn</b></p> 	<p>Public parks like</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Choa Chu Kang Park</li> <li>▪ Ang Mo Kio Town Garden West</li> <li>▪ West Coast Park near Adventure Playgrounds</li> </ul>	<p>Meandering paths, benches and stepping stones engage children at multiple levels; allows creation of micro gardens; children learn about nature right at the doorstep</p>
<p><b>At the farm</b></p> 	<p>Near farms like</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bollywood Veggies along Neo Tiew Road</li> <li>▪ Farmart Centre at Sungei Tengah Road</li> <li>▪ Rosewood Drive near Singapore Sports School</li> </ul>	<p>Children can benefit from a curriculum focused on plant cultivation and natural processes; farm-themed playground with objects one might see at an actual farm—a tyre swing, a rope bridge, and a “fort” made of wooden posts.</p>
<p><b>On the water</b></p> 	<p>Waterways such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sengkang River next to Anchorvale CC</li> <li>▪ Lower Seletar Reservoir along Yishun Avenue 1</li> <li>▪ Woodlands Waterfront Park</li> </ul>	<p>Classrooms atop a floating platform provide a space for children to observe riverine life and have a better awareness of the river environment.</p> <p>A partially submerged platform gives water play opportunities</p>
<p><b>By the tracks</b></p> 	<p>Green corridor left behind by KTM Railway line such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stretch near Buona Vista MRT Station</li> <li>▪ Between Queensway &amp; Portsdown Avenue</li> <li>▪ Near Hillview Road &amp; Upper Bukit Timah Road</li> </ul>	<p>Classrooms are freestanding but under a common sheltering roof, which allows for the free flow of air, light and space among them; other features include a running track and climbing walls</p>
<p><b>Beyond the block</b></p> 	<p>Void deck classrooms that extend to the adjacent field such as at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Blk 339B, Kang Ching Road</li> <li>▪ Blk 315C Yishun Greenwalk at Yishun Avenue 9</li> <li>▪ Blks 293B &amp; 293C, Compassvale Boardwalk at Compassvale Crescent</li> </ul>	<p>Made up of a variable system to adapt to different HDB void deck configurations with open classrooms that exist on neighbouring lawns.</p> <p>Outdoor learning and play areas can be built to create a sense of openness with amenities shared with seniors and other community members</p>

\* Source pictures to: Lien Foundation and Lekker Architects