

# HEART MAKES A CONCRETE CITY A HOME

A global city like S'pore needs its heroes of conscience too

**CLARENCE TI BOON WEE**

WE ARE a young nation. It is probably even appropriate to label us as precocious. In one generation, we have eliminated almost all extreme poverty, reached full employment and achieved a level of prosperity that is the envy of many. And we are not done yet.

The Gardens by the Bay, the new Sports Hub, National Arts Gallery, One North, the Integrated Resorts, a freshwater reservoir in the heart of our city, more world-class universities, a new financial district: These icons which will chart Singapore's cityscape and give the island-state personality, character and life.

Everywhere you look, Singaporeans will get new places to live, work, learn and play. To achieve integration with such diversity takes a fine balance between having structured and natural spaces – set within a creative cycle of recycle and renewal of land to achieve optimal use and socio-economic benefits for all.

However, a home is not built around cityscapes and hard infrastructure. It is built on our values and our relationships. Lest we forget, there is the story of Ozymandias, who declared: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" Nothing remained of Ozymandias' works but shattered fragments of his statue in a desert of sand and stars.

A home is where our parents, our siblings, our children, our friends, our fellow citizens live their lives; a place where they seek to derive meaning and belonging. Sometimes, we catch a glimpse of what it means for our city to become a home. These glimpses show us the heart of a society.

These glimpses prod us, they shame us, they inspire us. Here are three examples:

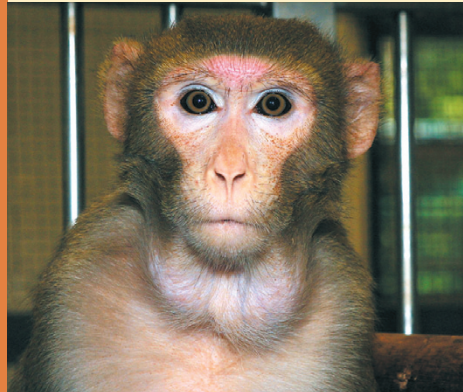
## VOICES OF CONSCIENCE

This year, the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), celebrates



**MERCY RELIEF:** (Left) Singer Stefanie Sun at an orphanage in Meulaboh last year, as part of the organisation's efforts to rebuild the tsunami-wrecked Indonesian city.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARCOM PRACTICE GROUP RHESUS



**ANIMAL SAVIOURS:** Thanks to Acres, Asha (above) was rescued and sent to a sanctuary.

**INCLUSIVE WORLD:** (Left) Last year's photo exhibition by Yann Arthus-Bertrand had a Braille version too.

its fifth birthday. This is the year that rescued rhesus macaque Asha found a new lease of life in a wildlife sanctuary in India.

In 2004, Asha was found by Acres in a warehouse in Singapore where she was kept illegally as a pet. A chain restricted her movement and she was deprived of companionship of her own kind.

The monkey is not alone. The Acres Wildlife Crisis Hotline has led to the rescue of more than 160 animals from the illegal pet trade – from private homes, pet shops and dealers in Singapore. It speaks well of us that more people are coming together to be the voices of our conscience.

The next big project would be to build our own wildlife rescue centre in Singapore, a place of sanctuary for those animals so rudely brought to our island, while we find a way to send them back to their natural environments.

## TRULY INCLUSIVE

Last year, the Singapore Environment Council, together with the French Embassy, presented the "Earth from Above" Exhibition by French photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand along Orchard Road. Over a span

of nearly three months, it conveyed messages of sustainable environment through truly breathtaking photographs taken from helicopters. Hopefully, it helped to mould the civic consciousness of our young and provided a role model for those in the visual arts.

Many underestimate the cost of curating and presenting an outdoor exhibition for such a long period, braving Singapore's hot and humid weather. It speaks well of us that we have done this. And truly inspired was the Braille version of the exhibition. A photographic exhibition for the blind – talk about an inclusive society.

## THE QUALITY OF MERCY

Mercy Relief is one of the most active of our humanitarian organisations in Singapore. You will find them showing up to alleviate human suffering in disaster areas in our region. They extend our reach to parts of the world most Singaporeans are unlikely to visit as tourists.

When we look beyond our shores at pain and suffering, some of us must step up and say that global crises such as the tsunami cannot be met only with our support. They must be met with our strength, too – so that help is given not only because it is in our interest but also in our values.

These people do this, and they get us to do it too. Just after the 2004 tsunami,

more than 1,000 locals and foreigners alike donated their time selflessly at the Mercy Relief Centre@Lowland to sort and pack a mountain of donated clothes, blankets, food and water.

An old school of brick and mortar became, for a brief period, something more. It became a place regardless of language or religion, a place regardless of status or rank, a place where each person is known simply as a volunteer.

The photographers in this group, volunteers themselves, went out to take pictures in disaster-hit areas, pictures not of death and devastation but of hope and rebuilding. Their work was curated into an exhibition, "Glimpses of Light", which was attended by many schoolchildren so our next generation can remember life is not about exams and grades, but about reaching out to our fellow men.

## HEROES FOR THE FUTURE

I come across these organisations and the people who run them in the course of my work. I am often humbled by their energy and dedication. While many in the world today would effect change in their society by being martyrs, we have heroes of conscience.

Our home is more than a catalogue of economic achievements. More than a listing of buildings and monuments, it is a place where we can best exercise our voices. Our lands and properties, whether a piece of undeveloped land or a stretch of Orchard Road, all play host to these voices and their dreams of a better world.

Together, we must give every person a chance to reach his or her dream. We must ensure the opportunity is real, that the dream is neither deferred nor denied, that hope is not a privilege of the few – and that our global city carries voices of home and glimpses of heart.

*The writer, an Economic Development Board scholar with 10 years in public service, is director of Land Business and Management with the Singapore Land Authority. He penned this article in his personal capacity.*

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