

AT FINANCE, SINGAPORE

# Portrait of an art house darling: Singapore's champion of indie film

Karen Tan and her team are behind the island state's only independent cinema complex, and they're determined to make a difference to the cultural life of the city where major chains dominate the landscape

By ELENA OWYONG

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Karen Tan is co-founder of Singapore's The Projector. Photo: The Projector

Karen Tan has big dreams for her two-year-old cinema, [The Projector](#), Singapore's sole independent cinema. In a country dominated by mainstream flicks, she aims to introduce indie films to the island.

Privacy - Terms

While she wants to offer an alternative, 36-year-old Tan is all too aware that sustaining her business in the cinema industry is challenging. Singapore's other independent cinema, Sinema Old School, [closed down](#) after five years when its lease expired.

Even large chain operators such as Cathay Organization, which owns seven cinemas on the island, converted its only art house theater, The Picturehouse, [to a mainstream cinema in 2011](#) after running it for a decade, citing low profits. These days, Cathay Organization screens its art house films under The Picturehouse Selection banner.

The disheartening history of art house cinemas in Singapore did not faze Tan and Blaise Trigg-Smith, co-founders of The Projector, both of whom stumbled into the movie trade.

Photo: Pieter van Goethem

The first day in Redrum, one of The Projector's theaters. Photo: Pieter van Goethem

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“Our architect friend brought us to an old, disused cinema called the Golden Cinema on Beach Road and we saw the potential in the space. This was a cinema built in the 1970s and there weren't any others at that point in time [2014] that retained their original seats,” says Tan, who runs a consultancy and management company specializing in urban regeneration in partnership with Trigg-Smith.

Both fell in the love with the space and decided to use it as the home for The Projector.

“It seemed natural that the space should be an alternative cinema since we were interested in films. We also thought it was an opportunity to plug a gap in the Singapore cultural scene, which was an independent cinema to show an alternative, in case people wanted one,” Tan says.

## Not your average cinema

The Projector's beginnings were far from conventional. To raise funds to start the cinema, Tan, her sister Sharon Tan and Trigg-Smith [started an Indiegogo fundraising page](#) requesting US\$50,000.

Photo: The Projector

Michelle Goh (left), Sharon Tan (center) and Karen Tan of The Projector.

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Response from the Indiegogo community was overwhelmingly positive, with the team raising a total of US\$54,675 from more than 400 backers at the end of the campaign period.

“Crowdfunding tackled two problems – it raised the money and it also helped get the word out about The Projector,” says Tan.

“It also gave the contributors a sense of ownership because they feel they helped to start it.”

While Tan declined to reveal the full cost of starting The Projector, she did point out that a film projector goes for around S\$70,000 (US\$ 53,846), of which they needed two. There was also the small matter of replacing furnishings and renovating the venue. The cinema has two screening rooms – the 150-seater Redrum with red flip-up seats, sofas and beanbags, as well as the Green Room that seats 250. All the seats were reupholstered to maintain the original look of the Golden Cinema.

 Credit: Pieter van Goethem

A Q&A session with Singaporean filmmaker Kirsten Tan at The Projector. Photo: Pieter van Goethem

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It has been a steep learning curve for Tan and her team.

“We were not from a cinema background so we had limited knowledge of the industry,” says Tan, whose background was in investment banking prior to urban consultancy.

To work around this issue, the team partnered with film distributor Luna Films to manage program curation, while cafe Artistry’s co-owner is responsible for the food and beverage side of the operation.

## Thinking outside the box

Given that the industry is dominated by big chain operators, Tan says they have no intention of competing with the established players.

“We decided to position ourselves differently, which is why our tagline is ‘not your average cinema’. This is done through film curation as well as the environment,” explains Tan.

 Photo: The Projector

The Projector also has an event space. Photo: The Projector

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Aside from being a cinema, The Projector is also an event space where a diverse range of cultural events are held. One example is [Cineda:ns](#), a collaboration between The Projector and Esplanade’s da:ns festival where dance-related films such as [Pina](#), [Mr GAGA](#) and [Our Last Tango](#) have been screened.

The Projector's business model is also in part influenced by the history of art house cinemas in Singapore that have struggled to make a profit over the years.

"We diversified our income sources deliberately to reduce the risk of failing since we were unsure how it was going to pan out," says Tan.

To date, The Projector has multiple revenue streams – the box office, venue rental, the Intermission Bar as well as The Great Escape, a car park bar. This year, The Projector set up a co-working space called Clockwork where people can pay a fee to occupy the bar's space from 9am to 5pm on weekdays. After 5pm, the bar opens to the public. Tan says the co-working movement was created to maximize the usage of The Projector's space.

The Projector does not receive any government funding, according to Tan.

The diversification strategy applies to film curation as well. A wide variety of films, which range from classic films such as Blade Runner, mainstream films such as Split, as well as local films [Apprentice](#) and [Pop Aye](#) are screened at The Projector, in addition to art house fare. Tan says this is important as she does not want people to feel intimidated that The Projector is purely an art house cinema.

## Tackling the challenges head-on

While Tan shares that The Projector is "not bleeding", many hurdles remain.

"Marketing and financing are still challenges," she laments.

Although The Projector has established a strong following, it primarily attracts the arts and creative community.

"Some people are still surprised to know that The Projector even exists," she adds.



projector team first anniversary

The team behind The Projector on their first anniversary. Photo: The Projector

As for financing, The Projector, like all small and medium enterprises, is still subject to the vagaries of the market. Issues such as rising rents and manpower costs.

Additionally, The Projector is run by a lean team of eight that includes Tan and her sister, Trigg-Smith, two film programmers, one projectionist, two marketing executives and a cleaner.

“Now you know how many people it takes to run a cinema,” Tan says with a laugh.

A small team and a limited budget means upgrading at The Projector is a work in progress. This year, the team installed a proper box office after two years in operation. Prior to that, the box office was a cash register on a small wooden table.

The venue also poses technical challenges to the team.

Operating out of an old building means that there are power surges and there have been instances where screenings were cancelled due to technical issues.

“We operate in an old building, so sometimes there are power surges and that can adversely affect the equipment,” she says. “We try our best to minimize such cases and the screenings are always rescheduled or payment refunded.”

“We are not a brand new cinema, plus we do not have the finances to radically overhaul the sound system or have state-of-the-art equipment.”

In terms of future plans, Tan hopes to attract a wider audience segment such as young families and will continue to support local films.

To that end, Tan says The Projector organizes screenings of local films for school students as part of its film education program. Some of the titles shown include *The Songs We Sang*, a Singaporean documentary about xinyao – a style of Singaporean folk music that was popular in the 1980s. The screenings often include a Q&A session with the filmmakers.

The Projector also hosts family days, says Tan, giving the example of Disney’s *Frozen* sing-along session held last year.

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