

Sweeping Statements with Jerrold Yam



DDIY Studio [Follow](#)

Mar 9 · 6 min read

Here at DDIY, we believe in building smart homes and urban communities, while capturing the rich beauty and vibrancy of Southeast Asian cities. A big part of what we do involves delving into concepts of time, space, home, style, cultures of urban living, and asking the question: how can we live better with the time and space that we have?



Photo taken by Sarah & Schooling

We are continually inspired by people who pursue their passions in bustling Southeast Asian cities, contributing towards defining thoughtful urban communities. Today, we sat down with Jerrold Yam, an award-winning Singaporean poet and associate in Baker McKenzie's London Corporate M&A practice, to discuss what kinds of sweeping statements can be made about time and space.

You've experienced living in two very populated and dynamic cities (Singapore and London) at opposite ends of the world. What do you enjoy about both cities?

I grew up in Singapore and have lived in London for the past eight years. What I enjoy about both cities is that they are very dynamic, open, and they

have tons of food and entertainment choices. These cities are constantly on the move and time is of the essence. As a young person, I like being borne by that current of dynamism. Of course, if we zoom into the particularities, what I love about Singapore are my family, childhood friends, and university (University College London) friends who have moved back to work. London is very different from Singapore. It is a much larger city where you have the benefit of anonymity and you can be yourself. It's hard to come across as being "weird" in London. In Central London especially, people respect differences and difference is regarded as strength.

The art scene in London is also very developed and vibrant. There are many theatres and museums, my favourite being the Tate Modern. On the literary side, there are many book launches, things like conversations with playwrights being organised before the release of a new play, etc. In the past two months I've caught three plays and in a couple of weeks I'll be watching Daniel Radcliffe in *Endgame!*

Share with us your experience in managing your time in both cities. In what way has time changed for you since moving to London?

That's an interesting question because I think the changes in the concept of time for me are not down to geographical elements, as opposed to stages in life. When we were kids in Singapore, time was just a neutral concept. It was just hours in a day. Outside of institutionalised activities like school and co-curricular pursuits, you could pretty much do whatever you want. Not that we were counting, but there would always be five to six hours after homework was done, for us to spontaneously fill with random activities and just have fun.

It is really different now because the concept of work and time have become inextricably linked. We can no longer view time as a neutral construct. It is always tied to work. What is free time? Free time is time away from work. What are weekends? Weekends are times that we don't have to go into the office. Time being defined around work is how time, I think, has really changed for me.

You've authored three poetry collections, *Intruder* in 2014, *Scattered Vertebrae* in 2013, and *Chasing Curtained Suns* in 2012. You've also published individual poems since then. Tell us about something that has stood the test of time and geography that continues to influence your work.

I like using internal inspirations as opposed to external manifestations. For example, I'm not someone who would be inspired by going into the mountains and writing about the mountains. I might go to the countryside to free my mind, but that gives me the space to look internally and perhaps

launch an excavation of the self. I then use that material to write. Because these inspirations are internal, they have stood the test of time and geography. Things I've written about since I first started writing in 2012 include family, religion and sexuality.

You are both a writer and a corporate lawyer. How do these two passions or vocations come together?

I was drawn to legal practice quite early on as opposed to being a professional writer. I consider legal practice to be “work” — not in the way that some people feel is monotonous or just for the instrumental purpose of making ends meet, but work I am passionate about and freely choose. The things I write about in poetry are comparatively a lot more personal, so it's really hard to have that work element attached to writing. Few things scare me more than being a full-time writer, when one's whole life is contained in that insular bubble from which one inevitably derives affirmation.

Living in a cosmopolitan society, you also have to take into consideration things like planning for the future, taking care of my parents as they get older, making ends meet. I do not want to impose the requirements of how we regard “work” and a “job” onto my writing process, and neither should the pursuit of writing poetry be in disregard for one's other responsibilities. A lot of my writer friends teach, lecture or tutor. For artist friends, many often create “living room art” which is commercially popular and gives them the financial stability to pursue their more experimental and personal artistic styles. In some ways, it is similar to how I view legal practice. It's something I enjoy and am passionate about (particularly the constant intellectual challenges and the extroverted nature of the job), but it lets me continue my hobby and leave it untouched. I love being able to write poetry, whatever I want, whenever I want. Legal practice gives me this freedom away from the expectations of poetry grants and awards, which would be hard for full-time writers to ignore. I enjoy being both a lawyer and a poet — who is to say we should enjoy and commit to only one area of interest?

Do you feel you've struggled to split your time between the two?

At this point, I do wish to have more time to write. Legal practice in London is busy. The mindsets that one uses to approach legal practice and writing are also very different. It's not psychologically healthy to switch between the two mindsets. When I write poetry, I'm in touch with my vulnerabilities and insecurities. If I was in that mental space while representing clients as a lawyer, I don't think I would be very successful. As a lawyer, you have to think on your feet, appear confident, be completely rational and able to respond to uncertainties. Having said that, we only have a definite amount of time, so there will always be opportunity costs. At this stage of my life, I'm willing to take that opportunity cost away from poetry. The balance may

tip in favour of poetry when priorities change in the future. For now, nothing bores me more than being cooped up at home and writing 24/7, so it really is a sliding scale, not a decision between polarities.

At DDIY, we believe in creating time and space for our clients to pursue what they desire. When you are not lawyer-ing in the office or writing your next poem, what do you spend your time on?

I think the free time that I have outside of work, writing poems and chores, is very people-oriented. When I'm in London, it's a lot of catching up with friends and face-timing family back home every weekend. I do my best to keep in touch. A common observation among working people these days is also that having time alone is very valuable. For me, this involves reading a book, streaming a movie, Netflix, or just brewing a cup of tea.

[Time Management](#) [Sweepingstatements](#) [Ddiy](#)

Discover Medium

Welcome to a place where words matter. On Medium, smart voices and original ideas take center stage - with no ads in sight. Watch

Make Medium yours

Follow all the topics you care about, and we'll deliver the best stories for you to your homepage and inbox. Explore

Become a member

Get unlimited access to the best stories on Medium — and support writers while you're at it. Just \$5/month. Upgrade

[About](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)