



**Publication:** The Straits Times Life!

**Date:** Dec 6 2007

**Headline:** The Power List 2007; Touch Down; Making Museums Sexy

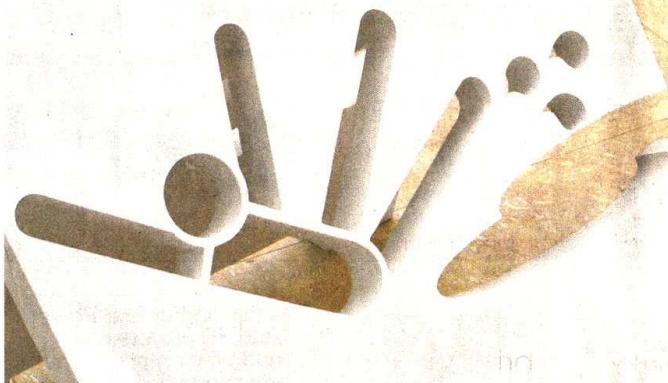
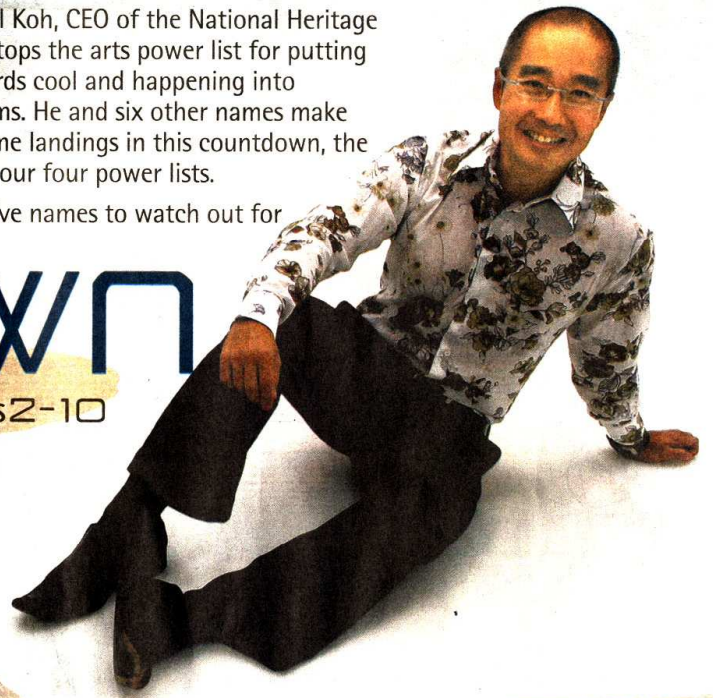
**THE POWER LIST 2007**  
**THE ARTS**

# touch down

Michael Koh, CEO of the National Heritage Board, tops the arts power list for putting the words cool and happening into museums. He and six other names make first-time landings in this countdown, the first of our four power lists.

**Plus:** Five names to watch out for

pages 2-10





# Making museums sexy



**Michael Koh, 46**  
Chief executive,  
National Heritage  
Board

A NEW flush of excitement and an injection of good, old-fashioned glamour have swept into the quiet, sleepy hollow of Singapore museums.

And it is because of the National Heritage Board's new head honcho, Michael Koh, who took on the role in September last year.

Since then, taxi drivers have been getting free entry into museums during an open day, actor Qi Yuwu, entertainer Dick Lee and former singer Kit Chan have been appointed to the Singapore Art Museum board and comedian Mark Lee has been hired as the ambassador of Singapore museums.

Refreshing, check; sexy, check; newsworthy, check.

He made it to the list this year for his bold efforts to reach out to the wider community, his daring moves to make museums interesting and hip places and, more intangibly, the buzz he has created for the arts and heritage sector.

Koh, who used to work at the Urban Redevelopment Authority as a planner, made the leap into the heritage sector at the urging of NHB chairman Professor Tommy Koh.

On his topping the list, he says: "I see it as a vote of confidence in the heritage sector and the good work of my colleagues. It just happened that I'm at the forefront of these changes."

His controversial decisions were met with a raised eyebrow, with newspaper reports discussing if people like Qi Yuwu and Mark Lee were fit to be museum guides.

He says these decisions weren't meant to shock – the public reaction came as a surprise.

He says with a laugh: "Events we can plan. People themselves create the surprise. Some said it was brave of NHB to do this, others not so. But it is an indication of us reaching out to the community, and that gesture was seen positively."

But his revamp of the museum scene isn't just cosmetic.

He has also introduced integrated museum programming, under which exhibitions and activities at various mu-



ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

**REFRESHING:** Michael Koh has revamped museums inside and out, with outreach programmes and expansion plans.

seums are grouped under a common theme to better market them.

Museums also have a bigger role in strengthening diplomatic relationships with other countries. For example, a Vietnamese Festival next year has been planned with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to better acquaint Singaporeans culturally with a country which is fast becoming attractive to investors here.

Within the NHB family, staff have also noted a marked change in management style. The office atmosphere has become more relaxed and informal, though they add that the workload has also increased.

Mr Walter Lim, 37, NHB's director of corporate communications, says: "Michael's style is more face to face. We work directly and don't have to go through the hierarchy. It's more dy-

**'I see it as a vote of confidence in the heritage sector and the good work of my colleagues. It just happened that I'm at the forefront of these changes'**

**Michael Koh on topping the list**

namic and fast-moving this way – things are done and cleared more quickly."

And the immaculately dressed CEO is good with people, charming

museum patrons and the media alike.

Looking ahead, he says that the community engagement efforts will continue, together with expansion of museum infrastructure.

The most exciting plan is for the Singapore Art Museum, which will soon have an extension into Queen Street, 8Q, a raw, industrial-looking 3,000 sq m space to show contemporary art.

The Asian Civilisations Museum is also set to grow, with it raising funds for the next three years to build more galleries.

And the aggressive courting of visitors will not rest – he says he won't shy away from new partnerships with unusual parties.

"We can't work alone in the heritage sector," he says. "We will engage the creative sectors for more projects and leverage on each other."

**Adeline Chia**