



SITE
situation
spectator

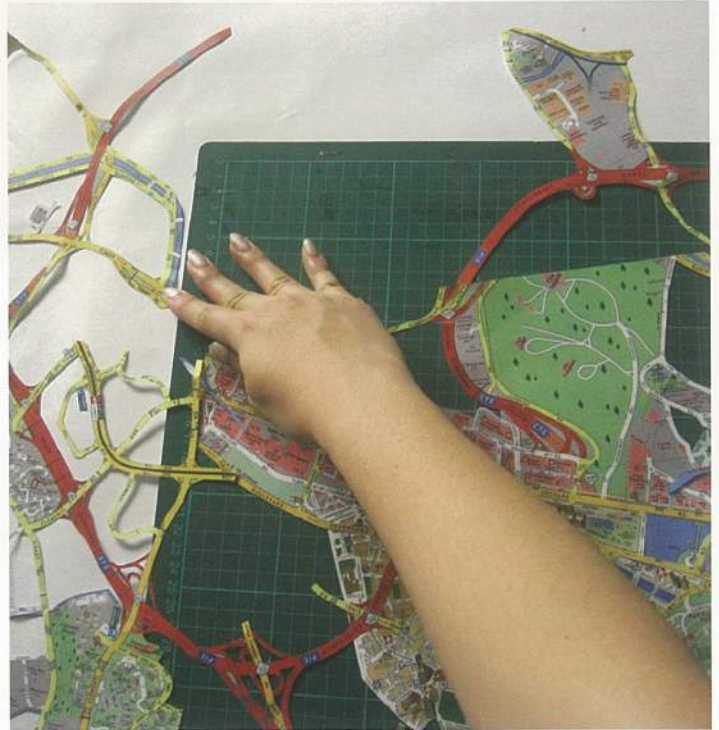
7 March – 7 May 2008
NUS Arts Festival 2008

NUS MUSEUM

SITE
situation
spectator

7 March – 7 May 2008
NUS Arts Festival 2008

on-campus NUS Museum
The Deck (Arts Canteen)
off-campus Jalan Kubor (Kg. Glam)



Coorganisers

NUS MUSEUM

SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

**University
Scholars
Programme**

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foreword

Ahmad Mashadi
Head
NUS Museum

In 1952, artists Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee and Cheong Soo Pieng undertook a trip to Bali. It was to be celebrated as a single most monumental event in Singapore art history. Resplendent in the paintings of these artists during the period were the images of the tropical *Nanyang* (Southseas), its lands and peoples, described often today as metonymic to the emergence of a collective identity defined by their multiple references to cultures, localities and contexts. More than others, the four artists are seen as 'pioneers' in Singapore art, and their status are proclaimed and reified over time by institutions including the most significant of all, the museums. Jan Lim, a student participating in *Site, Situation, Spectator*, identifies the museum as site of cultural production and consumption, whose technology and spectacle prompt public performance and reception. Paraphrasing the project title, how may we regard the relationship and engagements between the museum site, contexts and spectator? By investigating and testing such relationships, how may we consider significance and meanings, often held stable and unchanging? Jan Lim, in this regard, aims to destabilise our habit and expectation by investing into the Bali trip a newer narrative, referencing the Museum as location in which reception is conditioned.

The project was first initiated by Dr Lilian Chee last year in her attempt to encourage students to generate fresh perspectives in their regard to sites, their histories, contexts and publics. While initial discussions involved the museum curators Wang Zineng and Lim Qinyi which provided the broad conceptual grounding for the project, Noorashikin Zulkifli eventually collaborated with Dr Chee and her students in articulating the various works, developed in tandem with curatorial perspectives of materiality and the aesthetic experience. The process involved dialogues, site visits, conceptual articulations, and further dialogues. Sites are to be understood not only in its contexts of history and significance, but also in its contemporary uses and social behaviours. Projects are developed prescient not only in their regard to the question of place, but also questions the very meanings that are open to the generative relationships between sites and contexts.

The NUS Museum would like to thank the students Jan Lim, Debbie Loo, Hanan Alsagoff and Juliana Chan for their enthusiasm and industry. It also wishes to thank the Department of Architecture and the University Scholars Programme for this partnership.

foreword

Peter Pang

Director
University Scholars Programme
National University of Singapore

The exhibition *Site, Situation, Spectator* is the work of four Architecture+USP students under the USP Advanced Curriculum.

The mission of the University Scholars Programme (USP) is to offer the freedom to explore across disciplines, a wide range of extracurricular and overseas opportunities, and a community of exceptionally motivated and talented students. The USP Advanced Curriculum, in particular, gives students the opportunity to pursue their intellectual passion at an advanced level. Often, students engage in substantial, self-directed study. Always, they are encouraged to exercise initiative and creativity, and seek ways to create impactful learning outcomes.

I congratulate Hanan Alsagoff, Juliana Chan, Jan Lim and Debbie Loo for demonstrating the innovation and impact envisaged of the USP Advanced Curriculum. Their passion is apparent in the exhibition, and I believe the learning experience has been deeply satisfying for them.

However, their work would not have been possible without the strong support and mentorship from a number of people. First and foremost, Dr Lilian Chee from the Department of Architecture has shown tremendous dedication to this entire project. She provided tireless guidance and mentorship from the initial conceptualisation stage to the final preparation of the exhibition; she even worked out the budget for the exhibition. Dr Chee shows herself to be an outstanding educator who is committed to stretching students to achieve the most impactful learning outcomes. I am greatly impressed and inspired by her dedication to education.

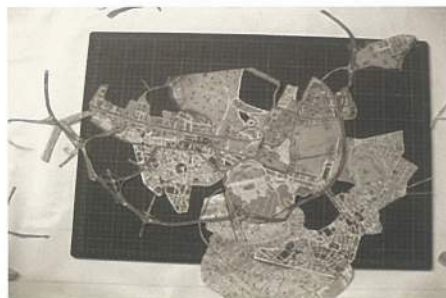
Other colleagues from the Architecture Department, including Profs Wong Yunn Chii, Joseph Lim and Chan Yew Lih, and Ms Lim Hwee Lee, and colleagues from the NUS Museum, especially Ahmad Bin Mashadi, Lim Qinyi and Wang Zineng, also provided important guidance. I am grateful for their unstinting support.

LEFT :
My Architectural Travel Map 1:n
Juliana Chan

Work-in-progress documentation

RIGHT :
Bali Revisited
Jan Lim

Photograph of Singapore pioneer artists in Bali



Architecture as art, art as architecture. Today, this seems a tiresome, if not, a problematic comparison. Yet this anxiety has been a source of creative production, and now in these works, critical interpretations as well. More so in our times and context, sites entered into discourse of architecture as art, akin to canvases of artists. Like the painter, the architect marks and inscribes his "canvas" with new forms, as he arranges and deploys resources in space. But sites are also inhabited, appropriated and transgressed. And like an artist's canvas, new meanings are elicited through these incursions.

The contemporary interest in site as a matter for creative investigation is understandable. It was neglected in earlier times, treated as superfluous or as an encumbrance. The equipotentiality of site was a virtuous attribute in the mechanistic production of space. And in the *tabula rasa* we see the extreme stripping of place into an abstracted slate. Some critics have characterised this as a quintessential Singapore geographical sensibility, fueled by her political ethos. But is this the case, and is it really so complete?

Thus the significance of these works of our four architecture students in the USP program. They offer four moments for us to see beyond the seen and prescribed, the overlooked and underlooked. They trace the residues of sites and to locate their hidden excesses—to show, finally, indeed if *tabula rasa* can ever be total, when another generation, of new actors, inhabiting spaces or passing by, re-inscribe new layers of meanings through their respective actions.

Wong Yunn Chii

Head

Department of Architecture
National University of Singapore



TOP :
Canteen Brick-down
Debbie Loo

Still from video

BOTTOM :
Jalan Kubor
Hanan Alsagoff

Photograph

curatorial notes

Lilian Chee

Assistant Professor
Department of Architecture

This exhibition sees the forging of a relationship between architecture and art in works by students of NUS's Department of Architecture who are also participants of the University Scholars Programme. Four projects have been developed in response to sites both on- and off-campus (NUS Museum, NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Canteen, and Jalan Kubor). The projects demonstrate the complexities of merging creativity within space through in-depth research.



...this site is not a precondition. Rather it is generated by the work... and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation.¹

Buildings are usually constructed to be seen frontally, but sites are more elusive. Few present themselves head-on. Around the corner, in the distance, even out of sight, they conspire illusion. The viewer's mobility is inevitable, the viewer's experience of place is inarguable, but the site is not static either. Expectations of a site can affect what happens there. So seeing through a site is a necessity.²

The question of 'site' needs interpretation. Site-specific work should be able to generate new identities, as much as they surface and sustain existing relations, histories and practices. Following such ruminations, the Advanced Module for Architecture in 2007–2008 is developed as an independent visual and textual research project culminating in a site-specific exhibit exploring the theme of 'Site, Situation and Spectator'.

Four architectural students re-examine their relationship with site. With insights into the processes of exhibiting, curating and conceptualising a site-specific exhibition gained through a series of curatorial workshops and artist-based programmes, they set out to learn how site might be reciprocally handled in contemporary art and architecture practices. This interdisciplinary exchange reinvigorates an in-depth understanding of site. It inspires new methods of mapping and expands artistic spatial perspectives within the architectural discipline. Thus, the exhibits emerge from a critical engagement with site-bound spatial practices, and their attendant socio-historical-political contexts.

Pedagogically, this programme emphasises constructive critique and collaborative partnerships. Thinking through the visual artefact is key. Students were required to read, research and analyse beyond the scope of their architectural curriculum. Conceptualising, and then, making the artifact, was crucial to this intellectual process. The exhibits were developed from a non-linear trajectory of tactile experimentation, and relied on collaborative relationships with curators, craftsmen, filmmakers, academics and policy administrators. Thinking was validated by making, and vice versa.

Ultimately, one also had to deal with the responsibilities of catering to an unseen but omnipresent public. Here, the question of authorship versus the issue of readability became central.

Invariably, some of the projects will inevitably be more persuasive than others. Nevertheless, the pragmatism of staging a site-specific exhibit made manifest once-abstract notions of place, the architectonic creation of conditions for experiencing the work, and mobilising this work to 'speak' to a projected audience.

The four projects attempt, if modestly, to delve into several complex themes, which intrigue and trouble architectural production. On a more specific level, these exhibits are variously iterations of loss, myth, mortality and private reverie. Using different media, various scales and operating across different sensorial and psychical registers, they comment on memory, consumerism, beauty and the imagination. *Site, Situation and Spectator* is strategically positioned at the crossing between art and architecture. In making a space where context, authorship and audience are understood and experienced as ultimately inseparable, it recapitulates these intractable conditions as creative and critical points in architectural production.

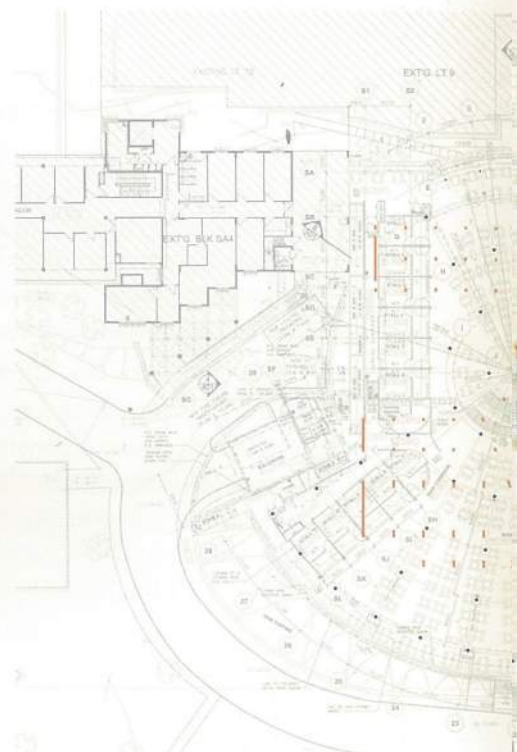
ENDNOTES

¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), p.26.

² Lucy R. Lippard, 'Around the Corner: A Photo Essay', in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds.), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.1.

SITE
NUS Museum

BALI REVISITED



Jan Lim
Year 3

*A third-year architecture
idealist with a penchant
for hats and maps and
an inclination towards
anarchism*

At the confluence of material and museum culture lies the creation of a myth. An otherwise singular piece of work is replicated in an assortment of goods in the museum shop; the reputation of the artist precedes his art, and soon what we come to know of him is as much fiction as it is fact. Museum going becomes an orchestrated affair and a ritualistic performance, while the act of buying 'souvenirs' further authenticates the experience.

The Bali trip of 1952 that was taken by our four 'pioneer artists'—namely Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng—can be said to be one such myth, popularised through numerous accounts in local art history. Today the trip is often credited with having incubated the 'Nanyang' artistic identity in its incipient stages, almost to the point of glorification. It is therefore time to revisit Bali.

Through a collection of artefacts, I hope to address the complex trilateral relationships between material, museum and myth in the Bali field trip, and provoke a reencountering of the art, while unsettling parts of our artistic consciousness. Ultimately, this installation is as much a commentary on museum goers themselves as it is on the artists concerned, in the parallels between the viewer's objectification and concomitant mystification of the artist, and the artist's of his subject matter. The institution of the museum, in mediating between the spectator and the subject, perpetuates the myth.

CANTEEN BRICK-DOWN

SITE
The Deck
(Arts Canteen)
National University of
Singapore



The Site is never a blank canvas—it is always already a palimpsest of narratives and forces. This video installation elucidates a particular narrative in the site of the NUS Arts Canteen—of dislocated forces between its present and past. This area of dislocation resides between the layers of the intimate red-brick columns of the old Canteen and the white grandiose structure that now stands. By mapping the past onto the present through the manipulation of the conventional architectural Plan, this video creates a 'back-talking' amidst the structural coordinates of the old and new, when both collide in real time, in this work. The process of physically marking out these various coordinates becomes a performance of an architectural plotting of the old brick columns with life elements. One is drawn along with the moving brick column on its quest of re-locating its position within the Site. A disjuncture in logic and expectations starts to surface when the dislocation between the boundaries of time and space are made apparent by the physical manifestation of the brick column in a site that has been completely obliterated.

Did it stand at the spot beside the guy eating his lunch? Or behind a food stall where the vendor is now standing? The different durations of activities in real time and the static fact of the old brick columns which are being plotted out in the video destabilises ones' experience of the space – planting questions of what once stood there.

While we, as a society persist forward and negotiate a physical and psychological landscape of constant dislocation, this installation reveals the unmarked truths of Site and its narratives, bringing to the foreground, latent past forces which resist dematerialisation.

Debbie Loo
Year 5

Debbie is a student of architecture, a lover of poetry, and a hopeful songwriter who longs for solo travels and tends to dip her fingers in too many honeypots.

RIGHT 1
Still from video

CENTRESPREAD 2
Current canteen blueprint overlaid
on former canteen blueprint.
Red marks indicate brick column positions.

Noorashikin Zulkifli
NUS Museum



Another set of curatorial notes arriving after an earlier commentary—which provides the exhibition project's intentions, conception and process—and statements by two out of the four participants on their projects, could be construed to act as an interruption, disruption or merely, a wrinkling of surface. As is often the case with interruptions and disruptions, what is thrown into relief here is structure. In this case, the configuration

of the 'viewer/audience/spectator experience' through a publication like this—considered and oftentimes, desired as a necessary accompaniment to (even a vital component of) an exhibition and the experiencing of it. At this juncture, the suggestion is made that considerations of 'site' expand to the exhibition as site, this exhibition as a site of sites as well as this brochure as a site of explication, commentary, annotations and documentation of the exhibition in order to elicit various dimensions of interplay/interaction/intra-activity: a little chicken-and-egg riddle, if you like.

The agreed starting point of the exhibition is 'site' in terms of first decisions made by the students, resulting in a thought framework which orders site first, spectator next or later; thereby positing a pragmatic fragmentation of the 'ultimate inseparability' of site, situation and spectator as the creative process. In an important sense, this necessary ordering of thought bears weight on considerations or accounts of the sites' (eventual) spectators and the possibilities of engagement with the works. Are the students' experiences of the sites selected (whether through site visits and other forms of field research) sufficient in constituting the spectator? The question remains if there can be satisfactory foreknowledge of the spectator; if the spectator can be disciplined into a well-defined entity or body that enters smoothly, or at least manageably, into the material-discursive space allegedly set up by site and situation/contexts. Here, 'situation' refers to changing circumstances or factors outside of the students' control or intent, which in an important sense forms the spectator. A person encountering the work onsite several times potentially differs in terms of spectator type and behaviour at different moments. Therefore, what actual relationships between site, situation and spectator could be investigated into and tested?

Throughout the course of developing these projects, dialogue and discussion required a constant (re)calling of (and in my opinion, akin to conjuring) the spectator onto this staging of site and situation but the spectator in discussion was always just that—the unnamed or roughly-named spectator. If such is the case, then it seems that this constrains to a projection, arbitrary construction or imagining of that spectator experience. Jan Lim's and Debbie Loo's chosen sites—the NUS Museum and the canteen at NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences—appear more clearly marked as places with functionality and intentionality that (per)form the spectator subjects, or at least allowing for a more-than-probable collective identification—as museum-goers and students/members of the NUS community. For Hanan Alsagoff, Jalan Kubor as site demanded a sensitivity opened to the criss-crossing of historical and contemporary socio-cultural conditions in working out the spectator subject as Malay, Muslim or tourist. Juliana Chan's initial choice of URA Centre demarcates the institution as site. Ultimately, these outlinings

of sites and their spectators were meant to contribute to, and should lead to real and dynamic engagement through the works.

As a way to consider engagement with site, Neil Leach proposes a theory of identification with places and articulates the phases and tactics of territorialisation (boundary-setting), narrativisation (making sense of place), performativity (creating a sense of belonging) and mirrorings (forging of identification with place). Taking architecture as a system of cultural objects in dialectical tension with discourse that activates or gives meaning to the objects, he concludes that "[a]rchitecture therefore offers a potential mechanism for inscribing the self into the environment. It may facilitate a form of identification, and help engender a sense of belonging. From this point of view, architecture plays a potentially important social role. The significant factor, however – beyond the nature of our architectural environment – is our engagement with the environment. Identification is a product of the consciousness by which we relate to our surroundings, and not a property of the surroundings themselves."¹

The exhibition and the works within it could function as a pivot, a connection point between architecture and social uses, inhabitations or understandings of spaces and places. The projects developed, in effect, either forms or gives density to the sites, yet these may not necessarily generate new identities or even satisfactorily reveal or revitalise relationships between site, situation and spectator. The site and situations produces its spectators, yet the 'site' through the construction of this exhibition is similarly a produced object. What should be elicited from this is enactment, not engagement. In view of the performative forces engendered by this exhibition, the term 'site oriented', rather than 'site specific', is preferred. And perhaps one can then conclude that generated through this exhibition are not significance and meanings or relationships, but the performance of site, situation and spectator.

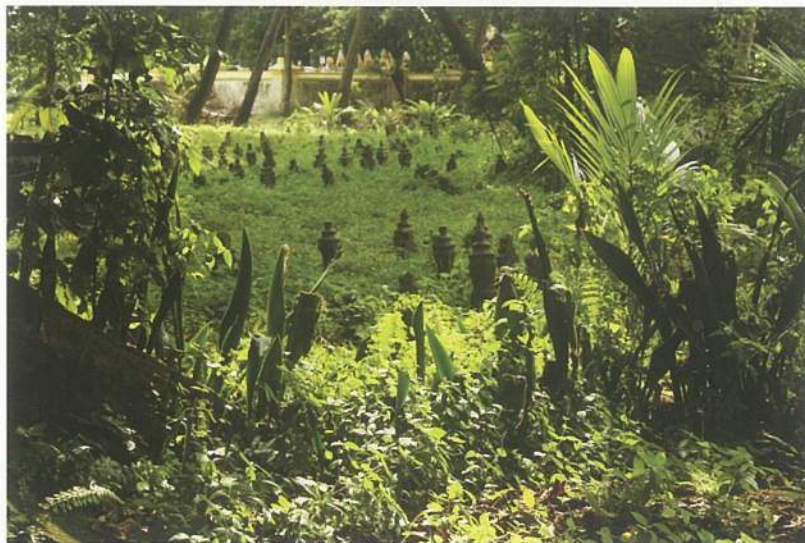
ENDNOTE

¹ Neil Leach, "Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Place", *Perspecta*, Vol.33 (2002), pp.121–133.

SITE

Jalan Kubor,
Kampong Glam

JALAN KUBOR



Hanan Alsagoff
Year 5

Hanan Alsagoff, a self-proclaimed global nomad and Third Culture Kid, is currently pursuing her Masters of Architecture in the National University of Singapore.

A walk along the streets of Kampong Glam in September last year led to my fortuitous discovery of the cemetery located along Jalan Kubor. Little did I know that such an innocent and casual discovery would soon develop into a deep involvement with the site, intellectually and spiritually. The Kampong Glam Cemetery is not just any normal site. It is a place of rich cultural and national history, dating back two centuries ago to Singapore's early beginnings in the modern period, tracing Singapore's history from a Sultanate to a Republic as it stands today. Personally, I regard the site as a no-man's land, belonging to nowhere in particular; no longer a part of the Kampong Glam most Singaporeans know of today and definitely not part of the surrounding modern landscape. It is a piece of land lost in time, neglected with age. Therein lies its beauty.

This hidden beauty is highlighted in the series of photographs taken of the cemetery. Each photograph is placed in its own viewing box, wherein it could only be seen if viewed through the peephole of the box. This method of viewing the pictures symbolises the process of life and death; one has to experience darkness (learn about death) before seeing the light (appreciating life). Before the cemetery undergoes its own death—as URA has slated the site for redevelopment into a residential area in its Masterplan 2003—I attempt to create a certain level of awareness and appreciation of the presence of this cemetery by linking the site, through a trail of these viewing boxes, back to the heart of Kampong Glam.

LEFT :
Photograph from series

CENTRESPREAD :
Map of route through Kampong Glam area.

MY ARCHITECTURAL TRAVEL MAP 1:n

HISTORIC
DISTRICT
KAMPONG GLAI



SITE

URA Centre
(initial proposal)

NUS Museum
(temporary)

Changi Airport
(proposed)

We started with what space is. I believe that people are the ones who created definition of the place through time. And so, I want to create an installation that allow viewers journey through time, witnessing how an urban situation evolved. That urban structure is a product of *emergence* (unplanned pattern) due to individual's preferences and behaviours. However, what media to be used?

As the theme firmed up into *Site, Spectator, Situation*, my ideas were reinterpreted by using books as main source of media. I believe that books are narrative bodies that carry traces of people's scribbles – their perceptions and misinterpretations. It questions how one should judge subjective issues such as architecture, art and beauty. Is there an answer to them?

Finally, we wanted something more visual and more into the context of architecture. The media is changed to using maps to narrate my perceptions of spaces as a mapmaker. It is a powerful role because his/her intentions are translated into visual representations that are selective of information similar to how we select information from books. The process involves translating three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional plane; transforming the scale of 1:1 to 1:n; selecting facts; and using iconographic representations. 'Facts' are translated into signifiers and signs that readers have taken granted as 'natural' and 'pure' facts. In the end, this piece of installation illustrates the main concepts and issues that had been discussed. Its 'spontaneity' nature goes back to the first concept of how places link and grow just like an emergent organism, at least in my mind, and how spaces and time are manipulated.

Juliana Chan
Year 5

*One wacky dreamer
who attempts 'leaping'
through time.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Singapore Art Museum

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Adib & Lyn

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JR Maxillian P Coro

Jeremy Hiah

Isrizal

Kenneth Koh

Shaun Koh

Daniel Lim

Mr Loo Ngiap Long

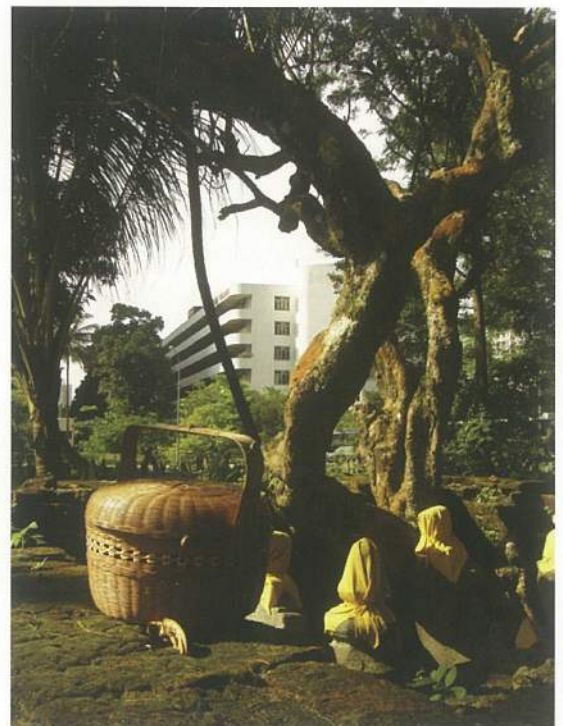
Mrs Doris Loo

Alex Nyew

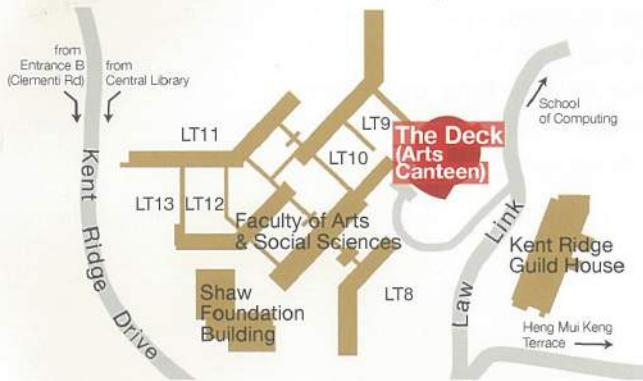
Sharifah Eitedal

Grace Shiew

Salene Teng



EXHIBITION SITE MAP

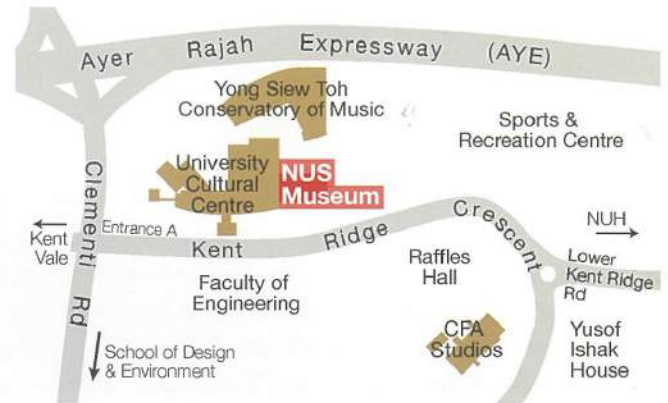


CANTEEN BRICK-DOWN

Debbie Loo

Site: The Deck (Arts Canteen; near LT9)

National University of Singapore



BALI REVISITED

Jan Lim

Site: Southeast Asian Gallery, NUS Museum



JALAN KUBOR

Hanan Alsagoff

Site: Jalan Kubor, Kampong Glam

Route starts from Bussorah St till Rochor Canal Rd

MY ARCHITECTURAL TRAVEL MAP 1:n

Juliana Chan

Initial site: URA Centre

Temporary site: ST Lee Atrium, NUS Museum

Proposed site: Changi Airport

NUS MUSEUM

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The **Lee Kong Chian Collection** consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the **South and Southeast Asian Collection** holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the **Ng Eng Teng Collection** is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the **Straits Chinese Collection**, will be located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

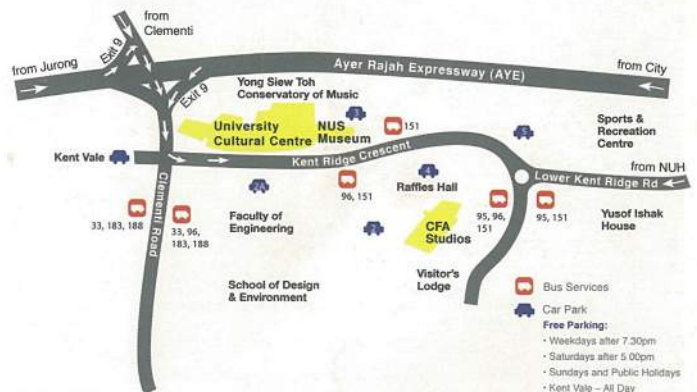
ABOUT NUS ARTS FESTIVAL (NAF)

NUS Arts Festival (NAF) is NUS' flagship arts season to showcase our campus talents—students, staff and alumni—and their unique partnerships with industry professionals. This year, NAF partners the medical fraternity to bring you a new *Arts + Medicine* focus, presenting novel insights into medicine with the artists' touch. This is the only arts festival around which consults with and incorporates expert advice from an Infectious Disease Physician, Medical Ethics professors and psychologists! With over 100 programmes ranging from music, dance, drama, film, visual arts, literary arts to a lifestyle bazaar, get your tonic-rich dose of Arts & Entertainment at the NUS Arts Festival!

NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279
Tel: (65) 6516 8817
Website: www.nus.edu.sg/museum
Email: museum@nus.edu.sg

Opening Hours:
10am—7.30pm (Thursdays—Saturdays)
10am—6pm (Sundays)
Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays



Getting Around:
SBS Bus No. 96 from Clementi Bus Interchange / No. 151 from Hougang Central Interchange / No. 33 from Bedok Interchange
SMRT Bus No. 188 from Choa Chu Kang Interchange.

