"SITE, SITUATION, SPECTATOR"
ALTERNATIVE READINGS OF SPACE AND HISTORY

COMMENTARY BY **DR LILIAN CHEE** AND **HANAN ALSAGOFF**
PROJECT TEXTS BY **KENNETH KOH, LEE LING WEI, SAM CHO** AND **FELICIA TOH**
IMAGES BY **DONALD LIM, NAJEEB RAHMAT, PRIME TAMBAYONG,
HANAN ALSAGOFF, KENNETH KOH, SAM CHO** AND **FELICIA TOH**

SITE, SITUATION, SPECTATOR IS AN EXHIBITION, SECOND IN A SERIES, CO-CURATED AND EXECUTED BY STUDENTS FROM THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE (NUS). IT IS THE PRODUCT OF AN INDEPENDENT-STUDY MODULE UNDER THE UNIVERSITY SCHOLARS' PROGRAMME (USP) FOR STUDENTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, CONDUCTED IN COLLABORATION WITH NUS MUSEUM. STRATEGICALLY POSITIONED AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND ART, THE MAIN INTENTION OF THIS MODULE IS TO INTRODUCE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES INTO THE ARCHITECTURAL DISCIPLINE. THIS IS DONE BY DEVELOPING NEW METHODS OF "SITE" MAPPING IN RELATION TO PARAMETERS OF "SITUATION" AND "SPECTATOR," THUS, COMPLEMENTING MORE STATIC AND PHYSICAL NOTIONS RELATED TO SITE WORK. THE EXHIBITS EMERGE FROM A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SITE-BOUND SPATIAL PRACTICES, AND THEIR ATTENDANT SOCIO-HISTORICAL-POLITICAL CONTEXTS.

"Space can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice."[1]

In the architectural profession, the understanding of space is often envisaged in the context of physical structures with formal qualities, as something that is framed within a tangible reality. Architectural space is seen as something definite, where, according to a textbook definition by Frank Ching, "its visual form, quality of light, dimensions and scale, depend totally on its boundaries as defined by elements of form."[2] The reality of architecture is thus looked upon as the combination of the elements of form and space.

Space is a term that is also constantly studied and re-defined in other disciplines, ranging from history, astronomy to cultural studies. It is possible to extract key spatial ideas from these various fields and adapt them into a plausible way of understanding or studying architecture, as a means of stretching the imagination.

The use of narratives, through various media, is one possible way to provide a more concrete expression to the "alternative" notions of space. This is done by way of internalisation and adaptation of information by the user in relation to their specific context or situation. Foucault's theory of heterotopia, or "other" spaces, talks about this "shift towards the subject," where the user/spectator (i.e. the subject) plays an important role in the experiential perception of space.[3] Such spaces are not bound by existing definitions or architectural typologies. They are also not restricted by physical geography.

The four projects in this year's "Site, Situation, Spectator" exhibition represent differently developed explorations of reading a space as "site," that is, as a territory with specific physical, socio-cultural and imaginative contours, and further, its translation into effective modes of communication to an unseen public. Three of the projects revolve around the Singapore River and one around the sites of bygone *kampongs* ravaged by fire. It is interesting to note that the chosen sites circulate around the elements of water and fire; one commonly seen as the source of life and sustenance, the other of destruction. Similarly, the four works simultaneously deconstruct and rebuild our perceptions of Singapore's spatial environments: through the re-interpretation and subversion of "official" history, the piecing together of undocumented histories, the heightening of aural perception as a

means of blurring the boundaries of time and space, and finally through the extrapolation of past and present geographies into a hypothetical utopia.

Narrative is used extensively in the projects. On the one hand, narrative is expedient in conveying meaning but on the other hand, it may also be used critically – for example in Kenneth Koh's guide to the Singapore River – to challenge our perceptions of official historical accounts. To varying degrees of success, these projects endeavour to highlight a site's contested histories and meanings, while striving to offer a perspective that is informed rather than skewed. For instance, Lee Ling Wei's monumental images depicting contemporary public housing are at once placid and expected as they are disturbing when these images are read in conjunction with a series of archival newspaper anecdotes that recount their historical situations. Certainly, the effectiveness of the narrative depends on whether the spectator is able to access, whether directly or indirectly, the intended meanings insinuated by these projects. A bonus to the narrative is of course the evidence of space.

Spaces have the power to contract history into a complex entity where past and present are intricately linked. A linear view of history in this case no longer holds.

"The problem is not to deconstruct authority, but to re-articulate new forms of authority which allows us to speak as critical fans."[5]

Ultimately, the aim of these projects was not to completely subvert our perceptions of spatial history, but to present "alternative" modes of interpreting spaces. The projects seek to understand how other evidences may lead to narratives, which may have been unwittingly obscured by history itself. It is also to investigate whether "chasing this evidence to its conclusion may make history stick, [...] a history which could matter for the future, and the present."[5]

The exploration of these "other evidences" leads to alternative histories, which may eventually alter our normative perceptions of the sites concerned. However, these "alternatives" are not to be considered as forces acting in direct opposition to what is official. The old binary methods of representing spaces in architecture and history, such as "central-peripheral," "real-imagined" and "conceived-real," are no longer sufficient to describe multiple levels of complexity. As such, the exploration of these "other evidences" enables us to have a wider view of history and its relevance to the present and future.

"... the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives."[6]

Here, the expressive – or what co-curator Nurul Huda Abdul Rashid calls "poetic" – modes of the "alternative," are key. "Poetry", she reminds us, "resides within everything, even the banal. It requires the clever reconfiguration of materials that lends itself a voice."[7] Indeed, the challenge of each project has been to find a distinct poetic voice. For three of the projects, the strategy was to imitate and subsequently transform (or in architectural terms, to re-model) the officious or normative methods employed, and meanings accorded, to each site. Thus,

the first lesson was to study the original closely so that the model would be a subtle but significant shift, a subverted "second nature" to the original.

In The Seven Bridges, Koh re-appropriates the power and authority of touristic historical representations to retell a network of marginalised but significant stories associated with the river. Lee's Reconstructing the Fragments juxtaposes architectural photography with archival anecdotes as a means to piece together undocumented micro-histories recounting the transition period between the kampong to Singapore's progressive public housing. Felicia Toh's Projections is the only project to use "traditional" methods of representation in the discipline of architecture, namely drawings and physical models, to illustrate a possible future. However, Toh subverts this medium by projecting a set of ironic utopian situations, each one taking the cause of urban development to its obtuse and phantasmic end. Moving in a different and perhaps slightly idiosyncratic trajectory, Sam Cho navigates through the river by way of sound. By insistence of the title, Cho's Sound of my River is a personal journey internalising a shared and flattened space as one's own. It attempts to present a cacophonic, unfiltered and multi-layered perspective where officious stories and sounds are blurred with individual opinions and recordings.

The more effective reconceptualisations of site were those, which were able to move beyond regarding its representation as limited to normative means common to architectural communication. They were able to harness the "viability of Popular Culture, life histories, interviews, everyday objects and archives, recitations of 'feelings.'"[8] In the same light, the exhibitionary mode, a format familiar to architecture students, becomes not only a conduit for displaying one's research but also a critical vehicle for learning. Through co-curation, and organisation of materials, manpower, social relations and funding, students are brought much closer to the tangible realities of working in the "real" world. In effect, this passage presents a steep learning curve, one that is more relational, pragmatic and urgent, compared to the frequently hermetic environment of the academic design studio. Through this process, the students learn quickly on the field, developing various skills necessary to persuade others towards their cause.

Exhibiting outside the realms of the architecture studio, and more specifically in a museum primarily known for art, also presents a tremendous challenge as the audience profile shifts dramatically from a focused group attuned to architecture, to a broader base. Conjuring up an unseen audience is always problematic. As such, the projects need to be developed in such a way that they appeal to the audience on various levels, from the most immediate to the most subtle and informed. Thus, narrative methods of communicating an idea on a space or a building, for example through architectural drawings, cannot be taken for granted. In order to be effective to the subject matter at hand, these methods sometimes need to be reframed or completely renovated.

Consequently, the pedagogical value of the exhibitionary mode, which operates outside architecture's disciplinary limits should not be undermined. At the very least, it offers a critical edge to rethink some of the a priori conditions which architects and students alike rely on to communicate fundamental concepts and experiences to the common viewer. Sharpening this channel is always a good thing.
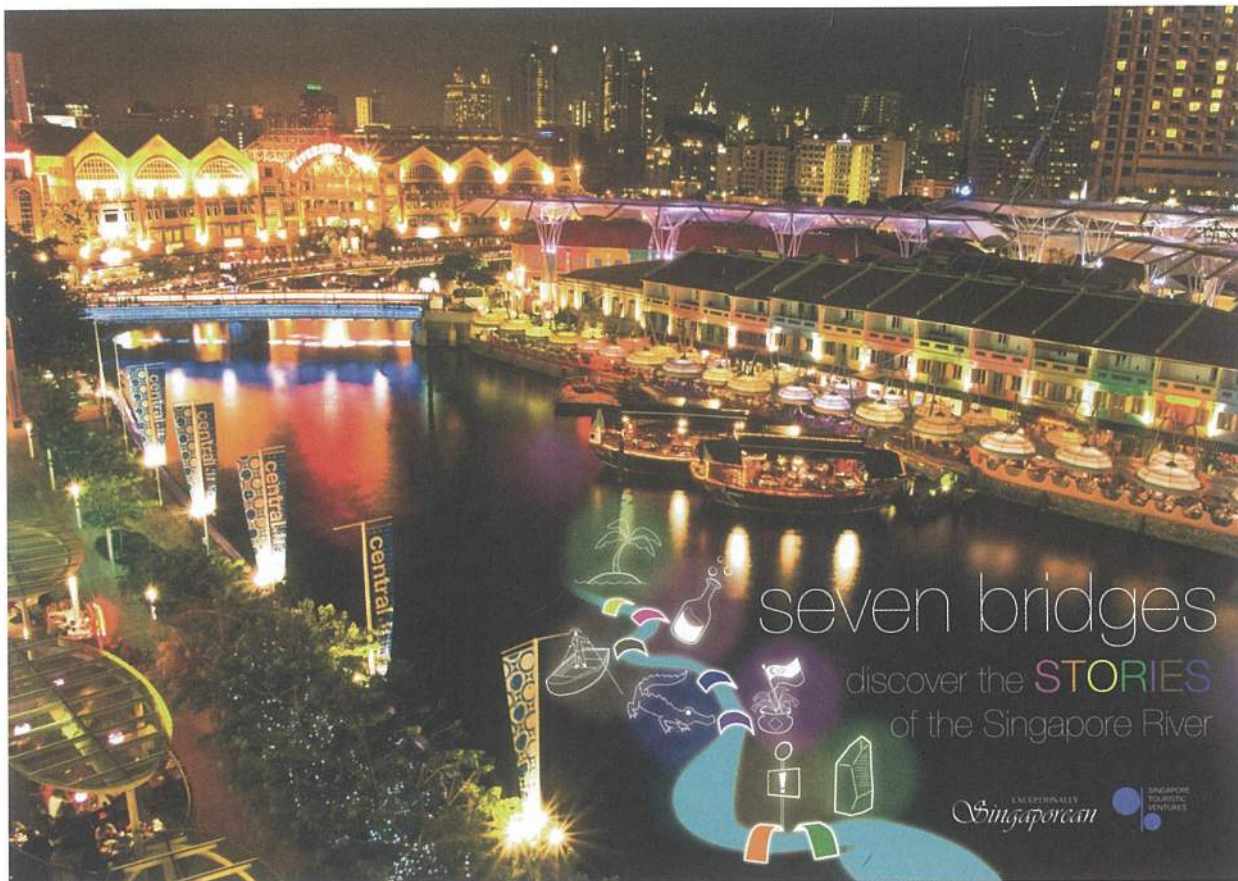
The Seven Bridges – A Guide to the Singapore River
PROJECT AND TEXT BY **KENNETH KOH**[9]
IMAGES BY **KENNETH KOH**, **PRIME TAMBAYONG** AND **HANAN ALSAGOFF**

The Seven Bridges is an investigation into the history of miscellany and unexpectedness, delving into subverted stories and information about the Singapore River. Taking the form of a tourist brochure that is to be inconspicuously inserted into the site of the Singapore River, *The Seven Bridges* challenges the assumptions that the spectator has of touristic media along with its symbols and language. This parodic brochure inherits the glossy aesthetics and hyperbolic voice that defines the anticipated experience of the commercial tour, easing the viewer into a set of expectations. While initially being led into what seems to be a typical touristic experience, the viewer soon realises that this tour is far from *ordinary*.

Many of the protagonists and objects that come into play in these inflated anecdotal tales become eccentric counterpoints to the characters that are commonly mentioned in the popular history of the river. The tour is strung together with tales that challenge the "official" perspective of the river: the multiple fables of how a sacred stone arrived on and eventually disappeared from a rocky promontory at the mouth of the Singapore River, the account of the incompetent engineer that built a bridge that was too low, the tale of the Guardian of the River, the nomadic Gardens of Peace, and more. The quasi-mythical yarns that are spun read like fiction, while based entirely on an alternative past that has never quite surfaced.

Part of this project is also exhibited at The Arts House, Singapore.

Eyewitness Tan Gwee Chew
and his brother Gwee Chan,
told The Standard that
two children
were letting off
fire rockets
when one lodged
in the bone-dry attap eaves
of the shop.

Assemblyman
for Tiong Bahru,
Mr. William Tan
had a
narrow escape
when a
pain-crazed cow,
charged at him
but missed.

The village barber,
Low Liew Wah, 40
laughed
hysterically
as he carried his
little bag
and
basket of clothing...
"My New Year trousers
are gone.
It was the best pair
I had."
He was
still
laughing
when he was
lost in the crowd.

"15 Acres of Kampong Houses Gutted By Fire,"
Singapore Standard,
14 February 1959, p.1.

"Kampong Tri. 11th Fire Tragedy,"
Singapore Standard,
14 February 1959, p.1.

"Those were too closed together,"
The Straits Times,
February 14 1959, p.5

this page
Tiong Bahru Fire, 1959: text.

opposite top
The Seven Bridges: digital
print on light box.

opposite bottom, from left
The Seven Bridges: tourist
brochure stand; Elgin
Bridge; page spread of
tourist brochure; Map of
Tour Trail; page spread of
tourist brochure.

Reconstructing the Fragments
PROJECT AND TEXT BY LEE LING WEI
IMAGES BY NAJEEB RAHMAT

"My brother, stark naked from the bath with soap bubbles still clinging onto his skin, charged out of the billowing black smoke with us, and continued running in this state of affairs for the next five hundred meters till we reached a friend's house."

The personal account above from my mother is a reflection of a similar predicament shared by many families living in Singapore during 1958-68. During this period, an estimated 42,600 people were displaced from their *kampongs* due to fires, which razed various parts of Singapore. These *kampong* fires brought about much devastation on both the human and economic scale, and engendered the transformation of our urban landscape. Despite the significant impact of the *kampong* fires, they have seldom been wholly represented in historical accounts.

After the fires, rapid development of low cost housing on the fire sites to re-house the displaced resulted in the erasure of all traces of the fires. This phenomenon is illustrated by the Kampong Koo Chai (Chye) Fire in April 1958, the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire in February 1959, the Bukit Ban Kee Fire in March 1963, the Pulau Minyak Fire in November 1964, and the Bukit Ho Swee Fires in May 1961 and 1968 respectively. In these instances, new blocks of flats sprung up from the fire sites within a few months, removing every remnant of the *kampongs* scarred by fire.

Reconstructing the Fragments is thus an illusory play of image and context, site and situation; a re-deployment of events that seemingly belie the spectators' expectation of what constitutes the "true" circumstances leading up to and following the *kampong* fires. The documentation of the *kampong* fires is conducted through the concept of fragments. The word "fragment" is used primarily to describe historical sources that provide "a contrary on the limits of scientific history and the scientific historian's search for truth." They take the form of anecdotes, folktales and personal narratives. Fragment is also used here to refer to the incomplete physical traces of the past, which still remain in the present.

The most tangible fragments that exist today of the *kampong* fires are the physical sites on which these events occurred, and here, are documented through the medium of photography. Each photograph is embedded with a "detail," developed from a specific anecdote related to the site. This "detail" defamiliarises the image, unsettles the spectator and "takes the spectator outside its frame" by evoking "a kind of subtle *beyond* – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see ..." The discursive function of the "detail" is further accentuated by another set of fragments – a collection of texts extracted from various archival sources. With the insertion of these texts, the photographs are situated as part of a social discourse and may be critically re-contextualised by the spectator.
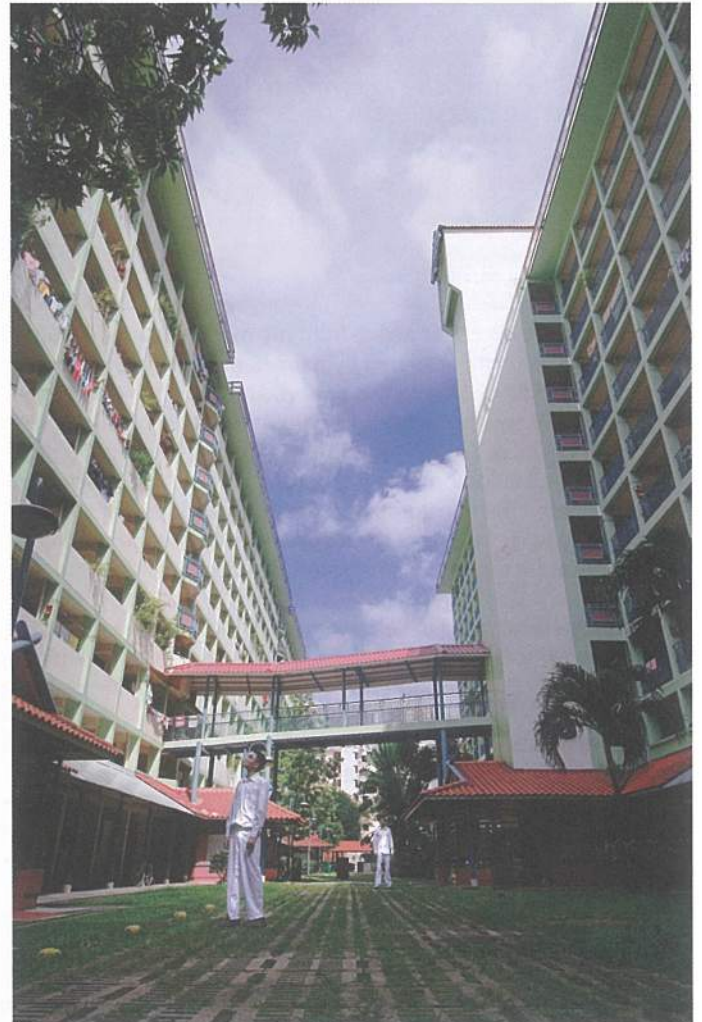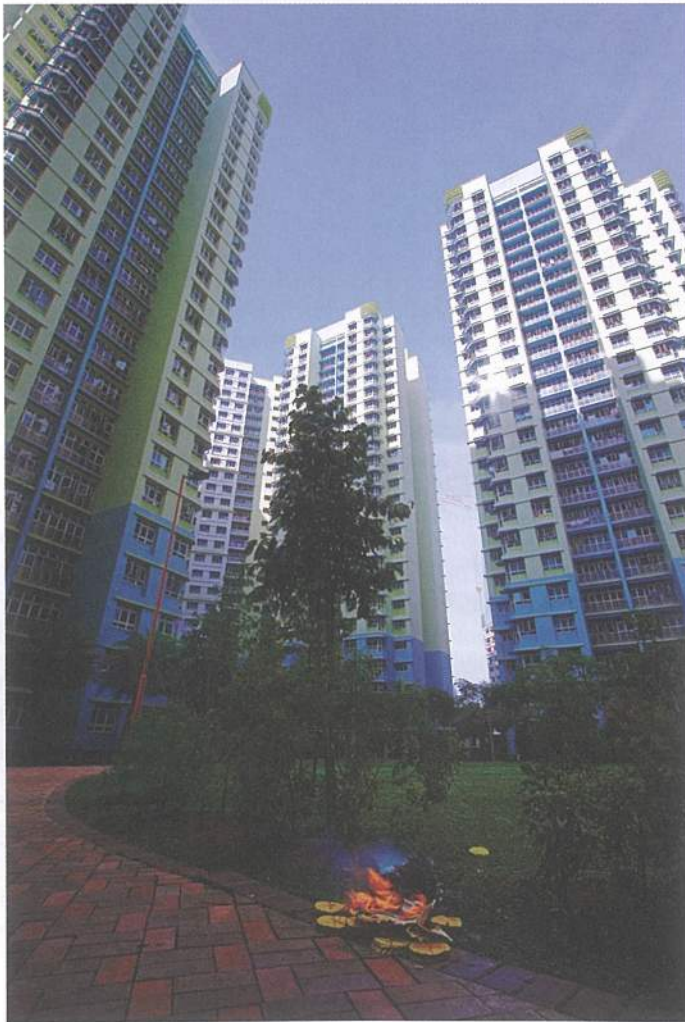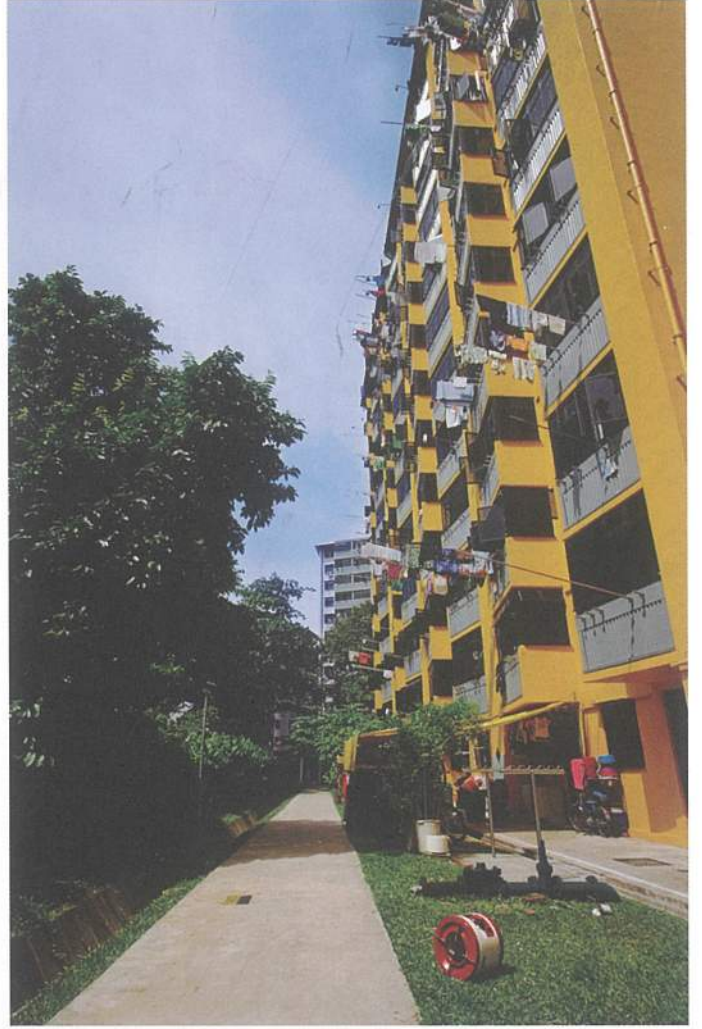
Sounds of My River

TEXT, PROJECT AND SKETCHES BY **SAM CHO**[17]

Sound is a medium with the potential of linking spaces, objects and events. In terms of meaning, sound is a "flexible" medium. The listening process requires a constant reinterpretation of meanings, rendering its content more fluid and subjective in comparison to text, sculpture or painting. This continuous interplay of listening and reinterpretation makes sound personal and specific to the listener. It encompasses an intimate experience.

Conceptually, the installation exists as an "antidote" to formal or official history – which is often presented as a single, linear, unbiased and even logical view of the river. Returning historical reinterpretation back to the audience, the collection of sounds from online videos, live site recordings, situational re-enactments and audio archive, captures diverse viewpoints, experiences and narrations. This "bottom-up" approach allows the story of the Singapore River to be retold according to the individual.

Sound of My River contains five "voices," each a category of sounds with a different perspective. The five "voices" – *government, news, student, tourist* and *personal*, offer a range of formal and informal histories, some descriptive while others are less structured. In the duration of the piece, an issue would emerge as the "topic of discussion" between the five "voices," including commercialization, sanitization and the founding of Singapore. These issues, called "movements" in the soundscape, offer a baseline for the "voices" to relate to each other. Partly because sound has the potential to connect completely random events, the installation attempts to create moments of "disbelief" and "shock" so as to bring out unforeseen connections between objects, events or places, for instance connecting coolies with pubs goers, and politicians with tourists.

Movement I- Founding of Singapore
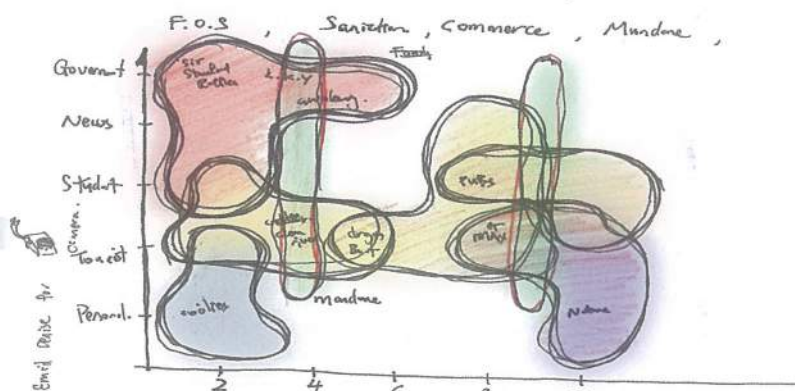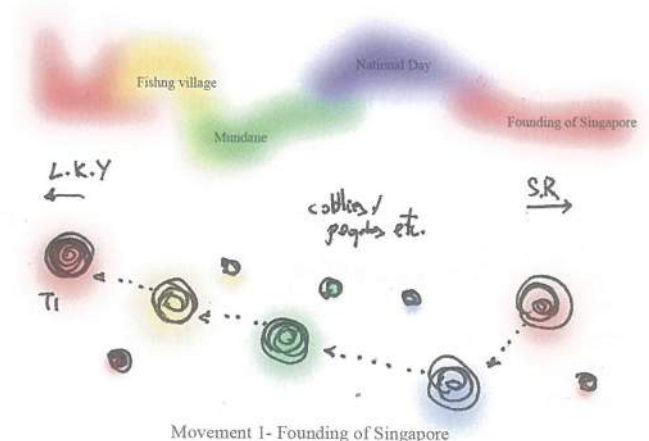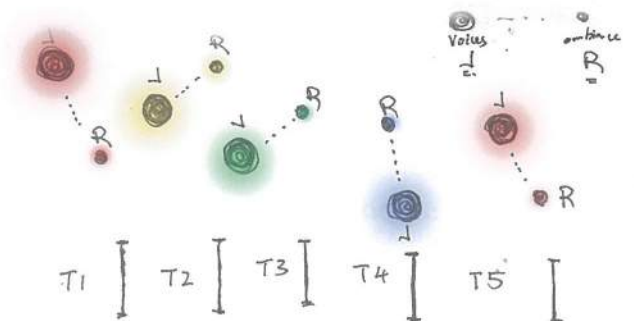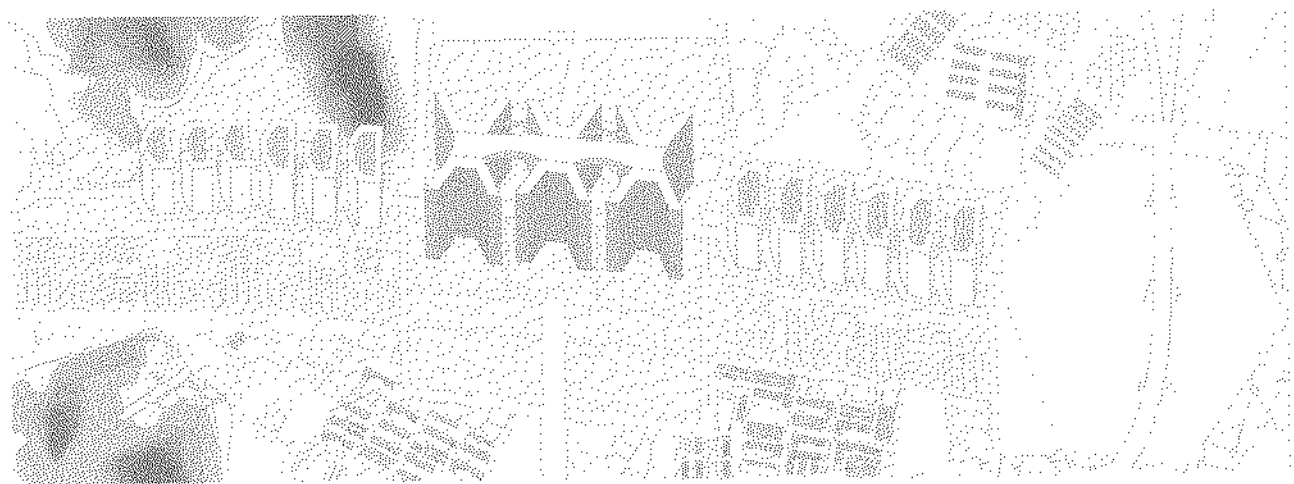
Projections: Singapore River
TEXT AND PROJECT FELICIA TOH[*]
IMAGES BY FELICIA TOH AND DONALD LIM

The Singapore River today is not the river it used to be. The river has been continually tamed, reclaimed, and straightened out to address questions of economy and efficiency. Boundary lines were frequently redrawn, while activities along those boundaries were forcefully phased out or relocated in light of our nation's rapid development. What used to be a dynamic and convoluted river encompassing Pulau Saigon, an internal island, which snaked through and connected pockets of our island has been reduced and abstracted into a line – demarcating what is on its left and right. Pulau Saigon was the last of three internal islands to be reclaimed to the southern bank of the river.

Through a series of drawings and models, the project traces the evolution of this water body since 1819 and contrasts that with a projection of the River of the future. Viewing these ever-shifting, malleable boundaries, we are confronted with the question of whether the constructed river is an enticing product of our fantasies; or a disturbing artifice – a utopian ideal; or a dystopian farce. "What will the river be like, a hundred years into the future?"

The Singapore River of the future could be completely subservient to immaculate authorial control, with no reservations towards drastic change. It is a highly efficient tool, which placates society's desires for lucrative tourism and breathtaking scenic views. It provides for modern living: desirable river-fronting apartments in mixed use, vibrant and high-density neighbourhoods, and abundant reservoirs gushing with potable water supply. Water-scaped rooftop reservoirs and lucky, prosperous waterfall features shall surely become the familiar fetish of progress, made possible by our agreeable and malleable River. ▓

"Site, Situation, Spectator" runs from 16 May to 12 July at the NUS Museum, University Cultural Centre.
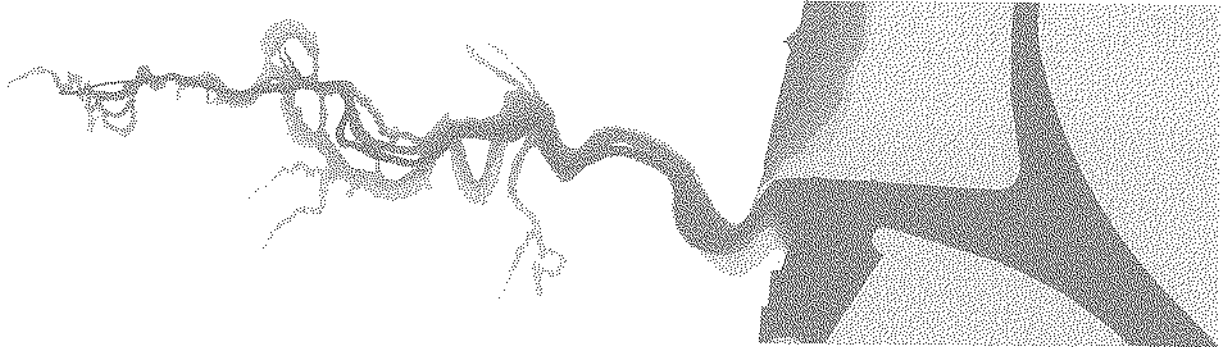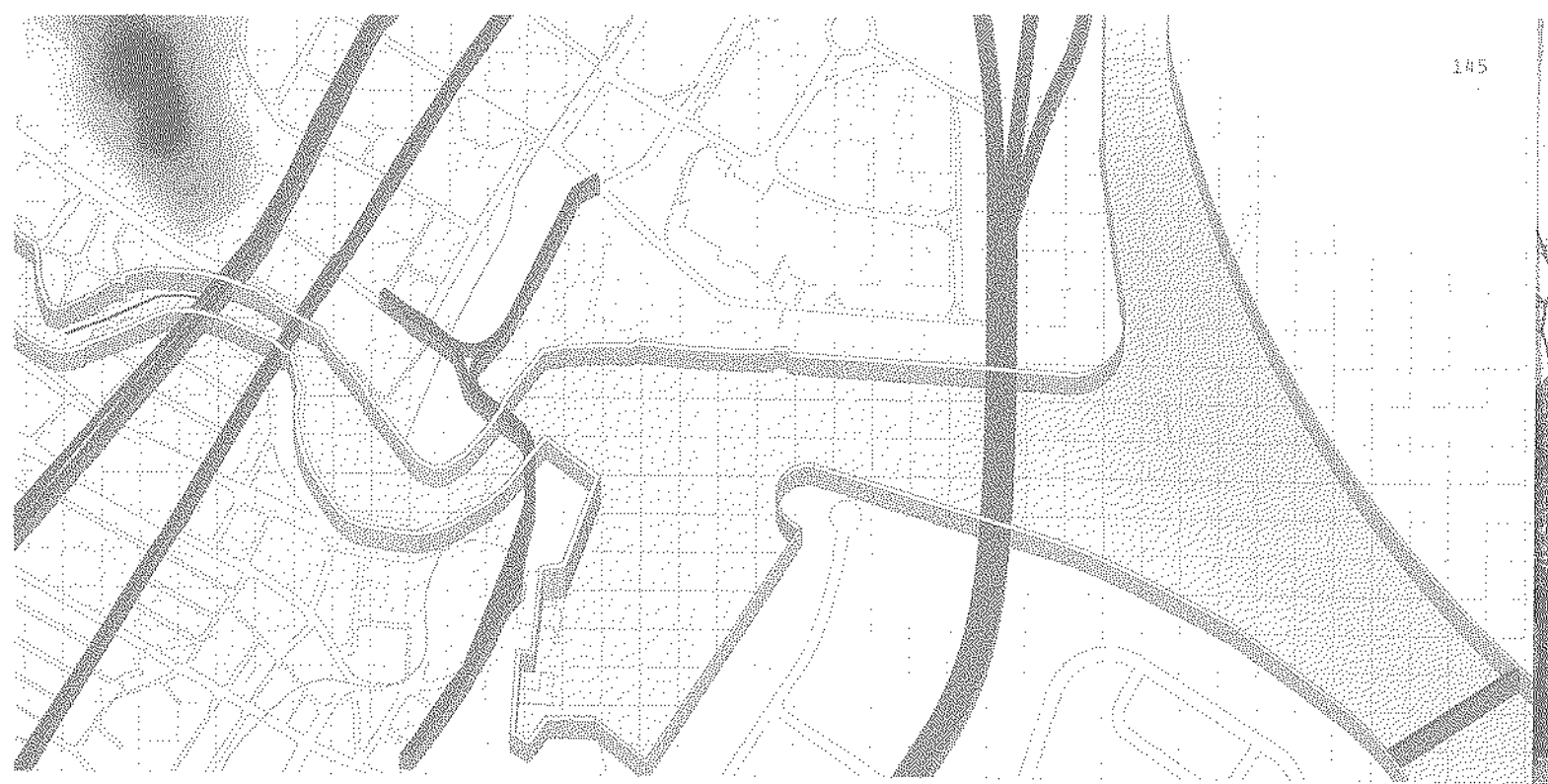
Notes

1. Bell Hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Gender Space Architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 203-9.

2. Frank Ching, *Architecture, form, space & order* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996), p.92.

3. Roland Ritter and Vlay Bernd Knaller, *Other Spaces: the affair of the heterotopia: Die Affäre der Heterotopie*, (Graz, Austria: Haus der Architektur, 1998).

4. Lawrence Grossberg, *It's a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics and Culture* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988), p.68.

5. Lilian Chee, "Introduction: Making History Present," *Site, Situation, Spectator* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2009), p.8.

6. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), p.5

7. Nurul Huda Binte Abdul Rashid, "Curatorial Notes," *Site, Situation, Spectator*, p.10.

8. Abdul Rashid, "Curatorial Notes," p.10.

9. Text by Kenneth Koh, *Site, Situation, Spectator*, pp.15-16.

10. Text by Lee Ling Wei, *Site, Situation, Spectator*, pp.16-17.

11. Lee Ling Wei. Interview with mother, 5 February 2009.

12. Lee's estimate. Sources: "Blaze Death Toll Up," *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1958, p.1; "Three hour blaze destroys Kampong Tiong Bahru: 12,000 Lose Homes," *The Straits Times*, February 14 1959, p.1; "Premier Lee Assures Fire Victims: Homes for all of you soon," *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1961, p.1; "Huts of 3,000 go up in flames," *The Straits Times*, 9 March 1963, p.1; "Attap colony in Kallang Basin totally wiped out," *The Straits Times*, 5 November 1964, p.1.

13. Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, (Stanford University Press, 2006), p.39.

14. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard, (New York: Hall and Wang, 1981), p. 42. Barthes defines the "detail" as the punctum, the presence of which "pricks" him and changes his reading of the photograph. The photograph is then marked in his eyes with a higher value.

15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.59

16. Mukerji, Chandra. "Review: Image Polemics," *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol.15, No. 2 (March 1986), p. 204.

17. Text by Sam Cho, *Site, Situation, Spectator*, pp.18-19.

18. Text by Felicia Toh, *Site, Situation, Spectator*, pp.20-2.

top
Wall – Projection of Singapore River: digital print on paper.

middle
Morphology of River Boundaries: digital print on paper.

opposite
Future River: digital print on paper.