

Lilian Chee

Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces

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You can taste it. The wet air of dawn in summer, the rising calls of a koel bird in a nearby rain tree, the silvery film of moss clinging to white-painted concrete. Architecture is a place where feeling emerges. If Singapore had a feeling, what would it be? In *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces*, Lilian Chee brings the reader closer to that feeling. There seems to be something provocative about Singapore's clean orderliness that drives artists, researchers, and scholars to seek cracks in its sheen, whether in contemporary incongruities or historic legacies. Yet it is a truism that Chee recognizes, that much writing on Singapore appears to be on the city-state's terms, pledging allegiance to its statist framework even while critiquing it. Instead, Chee turns her omnivorous attention to the leftovers "too unradical, too ordinary" to bear further scrutiny (23). Five spaces are discussed in this book: the Raffles Hotel, the former Tanjong Pagar Station, an array of Housing Development Board flats, Bukit Brown Cemetery, and finally the sea that surrounds the island state. At first glance they may not seem precarious, as the book's subtitle promises, nor are they unusual sites to those familiar with Singapore. But the way Chee discovers them is unusual. In this book, she brings the reader along as she shadows other protagonists. Sometimes they are identified in the time-traveling, shape-shifting figures of animals (a folkloric tiger, roaming community cats, a beached whale), sometimes in artists (Simryn Gill, Charles Lim, sometimes Chee herself), and occasionally in the temporally capricious building spaces themselves. Chee's prose is a relentless turning of the object of inquiry, always determined to view it from another angle. As if to accentuate this incessant panning for perspectival shifts, each chapter ends with an isometric drawing of the space discussed, viewed from beneath (as if one were looking up from deep underground, a worm's-eye view). Interspersed between written chapters are visual studies labeled "The Third Archive." These "extra-architectural"

chapters examine the same sites as the textual chapters through visual art or filmic lenses. The book's organization is deceptively architectural in its scalar logic of three parts, dividing the chapters among "Monument," "Block," and "Landscape." But the "subjects and stories" that make up the chapters, Chee tells us, have no place otherwise in architectural discourse (22). This organizational framework is also a suitable one for a book sitting somewhere amid architectural historical work, theory, critique, and practice-based observations.

Stripes, the tiger around which the first chapter revolves, was the last to be shot in Singapore. Stripes ostensibly escaped from the circus and found himself in the large empty billiard room of the Raffles Hotel in the early hours of 12 August 1902, and was shot by a headmaster who was called to the scene. To set the stage, Stripes is first introduced by literary accounts of the tropical experience found in Thomas Mann, Arundhati Roy, and George Orwell, alternating versions of the tropical imagination from a South Asian and two Europeans that set up Chee's framework for thinking about Stripes. Orwell's fabled account *Shooting an Elephant* (1936), for example, is often recalled in postcolonial studies for the doubt raised about what the "natives" expected of the Europeans, and how Europeans such as Orwell kept face in front of them—namely, by appearing unperturbed at the sight of a rampaging elephant. Chee, however, does not bring in this story for its depiction of the relationship between European and Other; instead, she locates the force of tropical encounter in the way the unruly elephant intervenes in an otherwise tranquil colonial order. In this "unsettling animal imagery," as with the tiger in the billiard room, the "unexpected intelligence of the animal/native close[s] inwards to further debilitate the weakening of empire" (42). Chee is not exactly reading against the grain here; rather, she is locating a different grain entirely in an otherwise familiar story to show how animal encounters destabilize and sometimes accentuate pompous colonial architectures. In billiards, two players circle a perfectly flat table that is stable enough to lean against and use long, sharp sticks to knock marbled balls into one another and into the small, netted pockets at the corners of the

table. In its slow pace, with players strolling lackadaisically around the table, eyeing their next moves, billiards is conjured as a quintessentially colonial game—the height of refinement, tempered repose, and measured decision-making that ought to characterize fin de siècle European empire. The presence of a tiger both offsets this appearance and heightens the sense of tropical extravagance. The Raffles Hotel to this day proudly describes the many (conflicting) accounts of the tiger's last night, apparently trafficking in a colonial rose tint that many incredulous tourists expect of the five-star hotel.

The Tanjong Pagar Railway Station is awkwardly sandwiched between the Ayer Rajah Expressway and towering apartment blocks. Once the terminus of the Federated Malay States Railway, with six trains to Kuala Lumpur daily, today it is one of few tangible relics of the former political boundaries that tethered Singapore as part of British Malaya. "The station represented personally for me," Chee writes, "a Malaysian who left her country for Singapore over 30 years ago, an unsettling piece of architecture," owing to its being given national recognition only belatedly, as it belonged to another country (87). Chee's exploration of this site comes by way of the artist Simryn Gill, who produced *Guide to the Murals*, a pamphlet about the station, for the 2006 Singapore Biennale; the pamphlet was sold exclusively at the station's newsagent. Like Chee, Gill was caught in the flux of identities that came with the 1960s border drawing between what is now Malaysia and Singapore stubbornly evinced by this station. Left in sweet decomposition, the station became (for both Chee and Gill) an "affective repository," where the "oblique traces of the repressed hostilities between the two nations" are held (91). Gill's guidebook, in Chee's telling, is a cipher for decoding the affective experience of the station, but it is also a generous meditation on Gill's work and a meditation on the states of decay so accelerated by the tropical atmosphere.

Roaming community cats guide Chee through the void decks of Housing Development Board flats in which more than 80 percent of the island state's population lives. Void decks are ground-floor courtyard-like spaces beneath the apartment blocks themselves, providing public thoroughfares and hangout areas. Keeping

cats in HDB flats is illegal, meaning that the felines congregating every evening are being clandestinely fed by HDB occupants, a situation that sheds light on the occupants' affinity for keeping semi-pets as well as the void deck typology's built-in porosity as an in-between space. Guiding us too through the ubiquitous HDB flats are three women, depicted in Chee's 2014 film *03-FLATS* (in collaboration with Lei Yuan Bin). The individuals in this film do not fit the archetypal image of the occupants of an HDB flat: the straight couple, kids on the way, aspiring professionals who are prioritized in the waiting list.¹ The single woman is a "conceptual figure of difference," and the women who live alone work from home or not at all, rearrange their flats, clean, and make art (175). They are shown in their own private domestic spaces, often with their backs to the camera, concentrating on tasks. In this essay about an essay, a chapter in a book about a visual document, Chee is not disavowing the HDB program but is showing the other lived realities that abound in the flats. Just as the cats that refuse domestication in their will to roam reveal how the HDB void decks provide spaces for people living in cities to empathize and look after animals, Chee shows an otherwise bureaucratic program of housing management in a different light.

Chee loves lists. Lists of trash, lists of household items, trees, plants, and more trash abound. Lists are a way of piling together otherwise disparate or unrelated things into a set, an arrangement, and are an effective measure in *Architecture and Affect* for creating new affective category systems. A list is also a way of curating a collection, and Chee's propensity for making lists in this context reveals a fascination with disparity, or just how unusual the everyday can be. There is a point late in the book where Chee articulates how attempts are often made to "explain" creative work, when perhaps what would be better or more useful would be to come close to the work, "to inquire further about the subject, displace preconceptions and theorize new directions" (200). This book is an illustration of how to do that. It is refreshing to read a work of such ferocious curiosity, in which the approach is so rigorously sensitive to details and tentative in explication. Singapore is celebrating its sixtieth anniversary in 2025. Having moved there

more than thirty years ago, Chee has already lived in Singapore for more than half the island state's life. In this dalliance with Singapore, *Architecture and Affect* is an exhortation to renewed curiosity, a paean to noticing, and, in a way, a love letter to her home.

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Note

1. "Greater priority for specific groups of first-time new flat buyers, further support for seniors, and more options for low-income singles." "Keeping Public Housing Accessible for Singaporeans," Housing and Development Board, Singapore, press release, 2 Mar. 2023, <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-publications/press-releases/02032023-Keeping-Public-Housing-Accessible-for-Singaporeans>.

Jean-Sébastien Cluzel

Survival Boogie Woogie: Neo-Japonisme Architectural Photography and Abstraction, 1945–1985

Leiden: Brill, 2024, 128 pp., 28 color and 96 b/w illus. \$110 (cloth), ISBN 9789004711402

Survival Boogie Woogie, with its provocative title, sheds light on an aspect of Japonisme that many may have sensed vaguely, particularly those interested in Japanese architecture and photography after World War II. Studies on the influence of Japanese architecture in the West are relatively rare in the field of architectural history in Japan. Research on the reception of Japanese architecture overseas, especially since the 1950s, remains in its early stages. In this sense, this book should be considered alongside Hiroshi Emoto's article "Shibui Katsura: The Emergence of a Japanese Global Icon, 1921–70" as a significant contribution to the growing scholarship on the subject.¹ Japonisme traditionally has been understood as the influence of Japanese art on European and American culture in the late nineteenth century. However, the Society for the Study of Japonisme now seeks to interpret it more expansively, broadening both the temporal and geographic scope. Various terms have emerged to describe the movement following World War II, including *neo-japonisme* and *japonica*, but none has yet gained an authoritative or widely accepted definition.²

The author of *Survival Boogie Woogie*, Jean-Sébastien Cluzel, is one of the leading experts on Japonisme in France and a recipient of the Society for the Study of Japonisme Award for his edited volume *Le Japonisme architectural en France 1550–1930* (2018). The study of Japonisme explores how Japanese expressions and ideas—as related to art forms—were received and evolved in the West. It has the dual benefit of shining a light on Japanese art forms and on their cult following in the West, mostly in Europe and the United States, making an understanding of Japanese culture essential as a foundation for such research. One can gain a complete picture only by contextualizing the movement's various aspects in relation to one another, as examining the movement solely within a domestic framework fails to capture many distinctive characteristics. Accordingly, the significance of this book lies in its analytical engagement with the interrelationship between European painting and Japanese architectural photography. Piet Mondrian's abstract paintings do not make obvious cultural references, so one of the achievements of Cluzel's scholarship is to situate one of the most well-known painters of the De Stijl movement within the framework of Japonisme. Cluzel's insights into the comparative study of Mondrian's abstract paintings and the photographs taken by Japanese photographers from the 1950s onward serve as a milestone in the emerging field provisionally termed neo-Japonisme.

Architecture and photography are closely intertwined, and in modern architecture, it is no exaggeration to say that architectural photography has played a decisive role in shaping the evaluation of architectural works. In practice, renowned architectural photographs highlight the close relationship between photographer and architect, such as Henry Fuermann and Frank Lloyd Wright, Julius Shulman and Richard Neutra, and, recently, Yukio Futagawa and Tadao Ando. Furthermore, during the interwar period, Japanese architects who traveled to Europe—including Mamoru Yamada, Sutemi Horiguchi, and Tetsuro Yoshida—actively took and published architectural photographs, contributing to the dissemination of modern architecture. As an example, Ken Oshima notes, "Although