

Chapter 8

Site, Situation, Spectator: Encountering History through Site-Responsive Practices

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1. INTRODUCTION

While the study of urban historical traditions in the architectural curriculum is a shared mandate, its modes of instruction have scarcely moved beyond the usual stock of precedent studies focused on form, style and typology. This method of instruction, though sufficiently providing parallel background knowledge for students of architecture, further isolates the disciplines of history, theory and criticism as increasingly remote parameters for design. In the context of Asian architecture's ever more prolific expansion, such antiquated and rarefied notions of history need to be urgently reviewed. Indeed, the future of Asian space hinges on the premise that its globalized formats are held in equilibrium by critical knowledge of its localized historical origins and impetus.

This chapter thus proposes a more complex relationship between history and design by revisiting how the historical aspects of "site" may be activated in the academic design studio through experimental pedagogies focused on the representations and fabrications of architectural histories conducted in relation to particular sites. Drawing on "Site, Situation, and Spectator," an interdisciplinary site-responsive program developed at the National University of Singapore, new methodologies for appraising and intervening with, as well as subsequently representing, histories of urban sites will be examined. In the island state of Singapore, the rapidly changing patterns of reoccupied, reclaimed, redeveloped and contested sites in its built environment become causes of concern in terms of their cultural and historical sustainability.

The question of what constitutes a "site" in the academic context can be prosaic. Yet, given Asian architecture's expansion, this question has never been more urgent. This chapter discusses an expanded notion of site by borrowing and transforming art historical principles, so that these ideas become relevant for architectural production.

The challenge is to find new means of engaging future changes while maintaining a critical engagement with a site's historical lineage. Techniques are adopted from within architecture and its allied disciplines — art history, cultural geography and material culture — so that the design process, which begins with a revision of attitudes toward the site's history, may cultivate broader contexts beyond a typical focus on precedence. In particular, the chapter will discuss how an expanded notion of "site" enables different modes of representation and fabrication, which ultimately poses history as a constructed and ever-changing category, aligned with the vicissitudes of Singapore's and Asia's future space.

2. SITE: STUDIES IN THE SINGAPORE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

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 to illusion. The viewer's mobility is inevitable, the viewer's experience of a place is inarguable, but the site is not static either. Expectations of the site can affect what happens there. So seeing *through* a site is a necessity. A site is a half-full, half-empty container, its content(s) visible to some and invisible to others. We choose the lens and then the frames.¹

Etymologically, to "re-member" is to make something part of the body. Memory and history make sense only when they become visceral. However, the place of historical memory in the Singapore context is complicated. History is a prime nation-building asset, and the Singapore narrative is, to a certain extent, reverential. Not surprisingly for a young nation, its primary themes are, on the one hand, tirelessly evoked in education and popular channels through a sometimes over-determined state, and increasingly, capitalist rhetoric. On the other hand, the possibility of history being incrementally embedded in the lie of the land is somewhat remote. Material traces of the past in its geographical terrain and the built environment are ceaselessly manipulated, reconfigured, or erased in the surge of rapid development such that claims of indiscriminating *tabula rasa* have been controversially aired.² The evidence of this physical upheaval may be observed in its stunning land reclamation statistics, which record the literal expansion of the island from an area of 581.5 square kilometers prior to 1960, to 699 square kilometers in 2009.³ To put it mildly, the very ground on which architectural intervention is premised is thus unstable, as it continues to evolve at a dramatic pace.

Due to its age, limited size and ambitious response to global and regional economic pressures, Singapore's architectural agenda as delineated in large-scale concept plans, redevelopment programs, building initiatives, architectural discourse and education policies, has focused on strategic aspects linked to nation-building and economic interests, which simultaneously serve to bolster economic expansion and promote patriotic

sentiments. The role of architectural education in maintaining this equilibrium is key. As the drive toward the "hard" or quantifiable aspects of architecture is emphasized in line with Singapore's push toward fiscal growth and cutting-edge expertise in various fields such as IT and sustainable practices enabled by the latest building technologies, certain "soft" features of the built environment such as spatial histories and cultures inevitably become less pronounced.

With these prefatory remarks on Singapore's economic emphases and its impact on the architectural education agenda, I want to focus on a specific activity commonplace to its architectural curriculum — the practice of site analysis. The study of site in the academic design studio and urban study program here typically considers formal and geometric conventions of massing, plot ratio, land use, typologies, and occupancy, with these aspects being presented in detailed plans and multiple diagrams such as the figure ground (showing mass versus void) and serial vision images (showing the successive progression of space on a key route). Lately too, with the concern for climatic and sustainable approaches, site study exercises develop mapping techniques which capture bio-climatic variables in building façades as well as how to minimize the harsh tropical climate through careful configuration of the built environment. In these formal mapping methods, site is conveyed as a bounded parcel of land with clearly quantifiable physical and economic values, equitably presented through the tectonic and informational qualities of the map and the diagram.

At the same time, socio-cultural-historical components of the site are cursorily introduced in narrative structures, which mirror a more teleological mainstream history where a lost or fading past is cast against a heroic contemporary sequence of demolition, tabula rasa and conservation. This abbreviated socio-cultural-historical narrative of the site characteristically annotates the objective and extensive formal mapping methods. The former does not exert the same prominence or carry the same significance as the latter, which appears to be much more thorough, scientific, precise and authoritative. As such, the nuances of the site's social, cultural and historical dimensions remain largely unexpressed or prematurely developed within the current site study agenda and its mapping techniques.

Instead, the urge toward historicity is more or less compensated with abstractions, where history is conveyed as an overarching concept of the space concerned, and disseminated as a narrative that is as easily reappropriated as it is slippery and intangible. For example, architectural studies of ethnic enclaves, state monuments and landmark sites frequently espouse the use of the aerial perspective as a means for getting into unfamiliar terrain. However, art critic Lee Weng Choy points out that this mode of representation demonstrates a propensity for the authoritative rather than the specific:

In Singapore, the notion of a bird's eye view has less to do with enjoying the island's scenery than with a frame of mind prevalent amongst those of us who live here who've made a vocation out of 'reading' this place [...] It is hard to find talk about any dimension of Singaporean life that does not quickly turn into a commentary about the totality of the Singapore system.⁴

Another example is the politics of the figure ground graphic, a technique derived from Gestalt psychology, which was originally devised to "show how the vestigial space around buildings could be formed into a figure just as recognizable as that of the surrounding buildings."⁵ The common use of this graphic, however, routinely highlights the "black" buildings while leaving the blank "white" spaces as undefined and invisible voids awaiting an architectural future.

The question is whether the same representational devices — the maps, the diagrams, the aerial perspective, the serial vision and figure ground images — are adequate to express the softer qualities of a site? Or to put it in another way, "what the map cuts up, the story cuts across,"⁶ that is to say, at stake are "two domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract — "the map"; the other one practical, embodied, and popular — "the story," and there needs to be, in the context of Singapore's academic techniques of site study, a "promiscuous traffic between these (two) different ways of knowing."⁷ Increased sophistication amongst the local populace in recent years has opened up multiple channels of inquiry such that the interest in statist perspectives are now being balanced out by alternative histories and narratives of space.

In response to this challenge, a new interdisciplinary program "Site Situation Spectator" (SSS) was developed by the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore in collaboration with the NUS Museum (an art institution) and the University Scholars Programme (a program emphasizing independent learning and extra curricular research projects initiated by students) (Figure 1).⁸ The strengths of this program are two-pronged: it advocates an interdisciplinary approach, which combines architectural and art methodologies in examining "site"; and it operates from an autonomous position, that is, being freed from constraints of having to produce a building design as the aftermath of site studies.



Figure 1: "Site Situation Spectator" exhibition, NUS Museum, May–July 2009

Selecting, surveying, then materially responding to a site in an exhibitionary mode, SSS transforms a familiar, even prosaic, background activity — site studies — into a viable means by which the softer aspects of site gradually become real. At the core of this program is a set of ideas fundamental to the above transformation: the expanded definition of “site,” a reconsideration of site mapping techniques, and representational modes often taken for granted in architectural production, for example, the architectural drawing and the model. The remit of this program is to educate architectural students on the potentials of “site,” not as a finite means toward building but as a self-sufficiently discursive space, marked by socio-cultural-historical complexities as much as it is a bounded physical territory.

3. SITE: AN EXPANDED DEFINITION

In art practice, where site-specific, site-oriented, site-conscious and site-bound installations are shorthands for vanguardism, the notion of “site” is highly contested and nuanced.⁹ With formal academic training in one discipline (architecture) and interest in another (art), I am interested in how the same term of reference, that is, “site,” has translated across two visually-oriented fields of study. However, I should emphasize that by drawing from artistic concepts of “site,” I am not assuming that architecture and art are compatible for they are not, given their specific constraints and expectations. Nevertheless, as art historian Rosalyn Deustche has observed, site-specificity is a discourse derived from the “urban-aesthetic” or from “spatial-cultural” problematics, and thus, combines “ideas about art, architecture, and urban design on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other.”¹⁰ Hence, “site” in the art context is essentially a reworking of the same parameters encountered in architectural context, albeit toward different ends.

So what does “site” mean in art practice? There is first, the “literal” or “phenomenological” site, which is in situ, an actual location, and thus, a singular place with, for example, specific dimensions, texture, scale, topography and climatic variations, all which can be experienced firsthand. As opposed to the “literal,” a site can also operate as a “functional” or “discursive” space, that is, a space which is reconfigured by taking into account not only what is experienced firsthand but also encompassing invisible interrelated networks, institutions, economies and bodies which together sustain the site.¹¹ An example of this configuration is given by art historian Miwon Kwon who suggests that a space like an artist’s studio should actually be understood in relation to its network of patrons, curators, consumers and critics, who in turn occupy the spaces of the gallery, the museum, the art market, and even the space of mass media, where art criticism is manifested.¹² As such, a study of the artist’s studio, apart from knowledge of the physical site, should be attuned to the relay (social, cultural, economic, political, textual) of these interrelated spaces. The expanded definition of site as locational *and* conceptual allows for “the chance to conceive the site as something more than a place — as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group.”¹³

The question of “site” in art is more fluid and complex, perhaps because art is unfettered by architecture’s commitments to function, economic pressures and social responsibility, and thus, not compelled toward a purposeful “solution.” However, while art may not be functional like

architecture in terms of providing shelter or accommodation, artistic perspectives do provide "certain kinds of tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and social change."¹⁴

In a work titled "On Tropical Nature" (1991), American artist Mark Dion showed how these expanded definitions of site could operate concurrently. Several sites (physical and discursive) are implicated in this project — a rainforest near the Orinoco River outside Caracas Venezuela where the artist set up camp for three weeks and collected natural specimens; the gallery space of Sala Mendoza which hosted the work and where the crated specimens were delivered; the art historical curatorial framework in which the work was eventually shown, and finally, the implied discourse on global environmental crisis, power and cultural representations of nature. In Dion's project, the discursive sites (art historical agenda and environmental discourse) are given precise materiality through the artist's actions in the two literal spaces (collecting in the rainforest, and cataloguing in the gallery). And here, it is important to emphasize that these actions are performative, that is, they are specifically enacted to mirror and to critique existing practices of fieldwork, commodification and neo-colonization, for example.

In another work titled "Singapore River" (unrealized installation, 1972; installation at the Singapore Biennale, 2006), Singaporean artist Cheo Chai-Hiang, who was based in the United Kingdom in 1972, posted a submission for an annual exhibition of the Singapore Modern Art Society. Cheo's submission was pithy. It consisted of brief instructions to the exhibitors to draw a rectangle with the longest side measuring five feet. The drawn rectangle was to be sited partially on a wall and partially on the floor of the gallery space. The exhibitors were instructed to title the square "Singapore River."¹⁵ The Singapore River was a favored subject matter amongst local artists and according to Cheo, "There are at least 40 Singapore River paintings in the Singapore Art Museum Collection alone. Hundreds of other such paintings have been produced and consumed ... some simply forgotten."¹⁶ The radical representation of "Singapore River" as a big square marked by an arbitrary line as a horizon points not only to an oft-repeated composition of sky and water simply taken to embody the "Singapore River" but also critiques the meaningless consumption and representation of this site such that it is reducible to an abstract box and a horizontal line. Cheo's do-it-yourself instructions as a representation of the Singapore River, draw together the implications of the literal (the river) and discursive (the river as a popular art motif, commodity, and an inconsequential landscape) sites in order to question whether, and to reconsider how, the space of the river may be meaningfully recast.

A recent art project titled "Lifeblood" (installation, 2009) by Singaporean artist Twardzik Ching Chor Leng also revisits the river.¹⁷ Ching's proposal was to pump water from the Singapore River to the 8Q art gallery where her installation was hosted. The pipe would physically negotiate different properties, roads and boundaries presently separating the river from the museum. The artist, whose practice is based on actualizing material properties of natural landscapes in urban environments, intends to use water from the river to remind her audience of the river's "lifeblood" as this site is now detached from public engagement and synonymous with commercialization. It is interesting that the installation eventually ends up with a modest tank of water and extensive paperwork documenting the artist's correspondence history with various authorities and owners seeking

permission to build the pipe. In this instance, the river is shown as a contested site between various stakeholders, both directly and indirectly related to the space. Furthermore, it is evident that the impact of the river extends far beyond its immediate physical boundaries.

Thinking about site as a discursive construct opens up new possibilities in terms of architectural representational techniques. These techniques may take the form of drawings, models, words, instructions, directions, diagrams, moving images, guides, photographs, digital coordinates, graphs and devices. New mapping methods would have to consider a series of processes and operations that take place between the complex network of interrelated sites, both literal and discursive. The visual model here is not a map but more like an itinerary of events and actions, which galvanize and weave all these spaces together.¹⁸ The narrative model is not History (in its canonic modes) but micro-histories, which include the anecdotal and the fragmentary. And finally, the pedagogical model is performative rather than didactic, that is, students are challenged to demonstrate how site representation in itself is already a poetic construction *sans* the building; that this representation materializes ideas which were not there before, and thus, site studies become creatively productive in their own right. Crucially, in repositioning site studies as creative research rather than background work to design, "site" is reframed as something, which needs to be *created* as opposed to something which is already there.

Kwon argues that "... site is not a precondition. Rather it is generated by the work ... and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation."¹⁹ Her definition of site is generative — the site is not there already, but unfolds only through our encounters with it. This offers yet another creative dimension to site studies. The study should not merely respond to existing site forces and forms but also flesh out what the site *may* be. This prescient kind of site work is necessarily anticipative or allegorical, perhaps even utopian since it dares give shape to what is still indeterminate, unseen, absent, or repressed.

Returning to the academic design studio, the process of identifying and defining a site is frequently painstaking. However, once "found," a site is often quickly glossed over for more weighty matters of issue, program and tectonics. Even when "site" is specifically emphasized for political, cultural or social aspects, the studio brief cannot afford to explore the site's various ruminations, no matter how compelling. In actuality, "site" is the backdrop for more urgent work — the design — to fully materialize. As such, site studies, notwithstanding their thoroughness, are instrumentalist in nature and ultimately function as a means to an end. The notion that site is "in contact with something tangibly much greater ... a spatially and temporally expansive surround" is however, unquestionable.²⁰ This condition needs to be sufficiently addressed, or better still, documented and represented in more lucid and experiential formats. Following site's expanded definition, the exhibits developed under the SSS program will be discussed in the next section. It will consider, amongst other issues, how to convey a "site" beyond its practical constraints and potential.

4. SITE: PERFORMANCE IN THE EXHIBITIONARY MODE

The test of the SSS program is its ability to translate architectural research into another discursive and physical domain — art discourse and its attendant sites of exhibition — and also to appeal to a general audience with little or no knowledge of architectural conventions and ideas. But even while art remains distinguishable from architecture due to the former's lack of functionality, American artist Robert Morris reminds us that art-making is defined by behavior which closely mirrors the design process, "a complex of interaction, involving factors of bodily possibility, the nature of materials and physical laws, the temporal dimensions of process and perception, as well as resultant static images."²¹

As such, the convergence of both disciplines could result in productive, if not also lucrative, mergers. In Singapore, recent state initiatives through bodies like DesignSingapore, the National Arts Council, and the Urban Redevelopment Authority have sparked off funding and awards for design and art, and have also encouraged cross-disciplinary collaboration between designers and artists.²² The state's interest in such initiatives stems also from recognition that society's "softer" cultural aspects will yield economic benefits and business incentives. "Moving beyond the functional and efficient," former Minister of National Development Mah Bow Tan reminded, "we dream of making Singapore a city of distinction, strong in both the hardware of an attractive and efficient built environment, and the software of a vibrant, creative people. We want Singapore to be a choice location for talent, for business and for pleasure."²³

However, there is also a real risk that collaborations remain named partnerships on a superficial level when in fact institutional interdisciplinarity, as feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva argues, requires that the collaborators and their methodologies be changed by the merger:

Interdisciplinarity is always a site where expressions of resistance are latent. Many academics are locked within the specificity of their field; that is a fact ... you will find that some people think that their specialization is interdisciplinary in itself, which is tantamount to saying that they have limited knowledge of various domains, and only fragmentary competences! This gives interdisciplinarity a very caricatural image, and altogether reduces its scope as a project.²⁴

There is also the difficulty with placing one discipline within the domains of another; it may be that "previous studies have often equipped students with capacities which can reveal themselves as insufficient for the other field."²⁵ As such, the learning curve of "how" to present the site becomes very steep both in terms of skills required as well as maturity in making the call of what works and what does not.

The exhibitionary mode is a developed material process where the skills of a designer, curator, researcher, and intellectual come together. It is not only a conduit for displaying one's research but also a critical vehicle for learning. Through co-curation, and organization of materials, manpower, social relations and funding, students are brought much closer to the tangible realities of working in the "real" world. With its radical interdisciplinary agenda, the SSS exhibition, which also sees an active and pioneering collaboration between an architecture department and an art museum, is akin to what interdisciplinary theorist and artist Paul Carter describes as the

beginnings of "creative research ... or material thinking," a poetic operation couched within a seemingly logical reasoning process — "to bring something into being that was not there before."²⁶ Consequently, the pedagogical value of an 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 public.

For one thing, exhibiting within an art museum means that the audience profile shifts dramatically from a focused public to a broader one. Conjuring up an unseen audience is always problematic as NUS Museum curator Noorashikin Zulkifli points out:

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 a 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 types and behavior at different moments. Therefore, what actual relationships between site, situation and spectator could be investigated into and tested?²⁷

Zulkifli's critique reveals the blindspots in some of the site study exercises conducted within the Singapore academic context. In attempts to be inclusive, iterations of site are often over-generalizations of an abstract or absent public. Rather the notion of spectator may only be defined through, as Zulkifli mentions, "constant (re)calling of (and in my opinion, akin to conjuring) the spectator onto this staging of site and situation but the spectator was always just that — the unnamed or roughly named spectator."²⁸ The process of "conjuring" the spectator suggests two outcomes. First, the site is cast as a specific performance, which calibrates very particular rather than all-inclusive positionings of the designer and his/her choice of a precise public. Second and consequently, the performative site begins to dismantle distinct boundaries between the designer and other actors involved in the production of the built environment since architectural intervention starts to borrow from, and adapt to, existing *in situ* tactics, such as informal ways of claiming space, consistent patterns of occupation, or distinct activities through which a space is consumed or perceived.²⁹

The trilateral relationship between "site," "situation" and "spectator" is introduced as a means to transform architecture's disciplinary limits. It implies that a site is not static or self-sufficient in its constitution but instead flexibly conjured through events (situations) whether historical, touristic, patriotic, environmental, cultural, social, for example; and made sense of, or mediated by, the presence of an audience (spectators) who may be directly involved or have a stake in the construction of the site's meanings (for example, the students whose works are discussed here, occupants, state legislators, architects and urban planners) or those who are just passing through (tourists, the general public). Thus, each site representation must

deal with this trilateral relationship, and further, perform this relationship through a chosen visual mode of documentation. Each analysis then gains from a specific embodied perspective of an experiencing subject — the person behind the analysis — and shifts from a customary all-seeing, all-knowing method to findings which develop particular encounters and experiences.

For example, studies on the Singapore River by Kenneth Koh and Felicia Toh diverged by drawing on the students' affinities with two different perspectives — tourism on the one hand, and the erased contours of this landscape, on the other. Elsewhere, the slippages in canonic historical narrative are mined in Hanan Alsagoff's site-specific installation which moves from within Singapore's Malay enclave, Kampong Glam, through to its unrecognized edge, an ancient Muslim cemetery slated for redevelopment. These slippages are further reinforced in Lee Ling Wei's monumental photographs of Singapore's public housing blocks whose histories are entangled with a series of unresolved *kampung* (village) fires in the late 1950s. For Alsagoff and Lee, these sites also resonate with personal familial histories.

In each project, the site is performed by mirroring, parodying and reframing familiar modes of seeing, behaving and reacting already present in that space. The representational techniques take into account existing practices on, or related to, each site such as tourist brochures, walking tours, utopian futures, anecdotal narratives and large-scale promotional images, as ways to understand how these spaces are primarily conveyed and perceived by their publics. These alternative modes of representation also challenge the hegemony of traditional architectural representation techniques — diagrams, maps, drawings and models — which are effective for taking apart the literal site, but may nevertheless be opaque to more nuanced aspects of the discursive site.

One of the most challenging and exciting phases of the program is when students begin to develop their own expressive voices to evoke a site's characteristics. This expressive voice aligns with what student curator Nurul Huda Abdul Rashid calls the "poetic" mode of alternative representation. "Poetry," she reminds us, "resides within everything, even the banal. It requires the clever reconfiguration of materials that lends itself a voice."³⁰ Abdul Rashid, citing anthropologist Michael Taussig's concept of "second nature," highlights that these site-sensitive projects operate powerfully in a mimetic mode, often taking after the organization of an "official" narrative to engage minority discourses, historical flaws, gaps, and forgotten narratives:

... the nature that culture uses to create *second nature*, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.³¹

Indeed, almost all the projects imitated and subsequently remodeled officious methods. Thus, the first lesson was to study the original as closely as possible so that the model would be an imperceptible but significant shift — a subverted but powerfully effective "second nature" to the familiar original. The more effective site reconceptualizations were able to harness the "viability of Popular Culture, life histories, interviews, everyday objects

and archives, recitations of "feelings."³² Through this method too, students were asked to take the evidence they found on site to its conclusion, thus undermining the urge to corroborate with canonic accounts normally associated with these spaces. The intention of the exercise, in responding to the limits of canonic historical and social re-presentations of spaces, is not merely to subvert the officious nor offer an alternative Other. In fact, the binary model of "official" versus a single "alternative" is obsolete, as students are made aware of the specificities at play within their individual positions as author, experiencing subject and spectator of these sites. This exercise also emphasizes that other evidences encountered on site, when chased to their own conclusions, "may lead to narratives, which may be unwittingly obscured by history itself."³³ When this happens, site studies gain a critical dimension, revealing hitherto undetected or overlooked information.

Overall, "Site Situation Spectator" not only reconfigures architectural definitions of "site" by learning and transforming site-oriented principles from art practice, it also empowers the students with a pedagogical method that offers them agency as future producers and researchers of space. In a rapidly evolving Asian context, and especially in Singapore where excessive redevelopment renders a high turnover of building sites, the need to construct a robust theoretical framework for dealing with site beyond its monetary value is urgent, if not already long overdue. The pedagogical structure set up within the SSS program, specifically its emphasis on the "softer" socio-cultural-historical aspects of space, offers one possible starting point.

Site, as artist and art critic Lucy Lippard tells us, is elusive and evolving because our perspectives as designer, artist, occupant, tourist, or passerby, are effectively mobile. Yet, what is even more crucial is the realization that a site is not a pre-given space, and that as designers, we are complicit with each construction because "we choose the lens, and then the frames," thus determining the legibility of sites in terms of their appearances and in how their stories are told. The following excerpts revisit the projects mentioned above. They reiterate this complicity, and perhaps collectively, also pose an open-ended question as to whether there can ever be a singular and objective interpretation of site as we have been increasingly conditioned to accept.

5. SITE SITUATION SPECTATOR: A BRIEF SURVEY OF STUDENTS' PROJECTS

The Seven Bridges: A Guide to the Singapore River (2009)

The Seven Bridges by Kenneth Koh narrates the river through its overlooked history of local miscellany, these initially passed over for the exploits of the colonial administrators. The title refers to seven picturesque bridges, which take after the names of British officers, and which have become must-see landmark sites within the popular touristic route (Figure 2). Understanding tourism as "a distortional filter, which alters, exaggerates and censors the realities and myths of a site," the project takes the form of a tourist brochure to be inconspicuously reinserted at the river promenade.³⁴ The brochure mimics the sensationalist aesthetics and glorifying prose of the commercial tour (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Kenneth Koh, *The Seven Bridges*, digital print on light box



Figure 3: Kenneth Koh, *The Seven Bridges*, Elgin Bridge, page spread of tourist brochure

This technique initiates the spectator into a set of expected norms while simultaneously feature forgotten protagonists and objects, a few of whom are recounted with humor. Collectively, the alternative tales "bend the linearity of the River's history."³⁵ The new subjects of the river act as eccentric counterpoints to its official history: the appearance and disappearance of the mythical Singapore Stone, the tale of the incompetent engineer who built a bridge too low for river traffic, the story of the river's self-appointed Guardian, the nomadic Gardens of Peace, and tales of murder and inebriation. Each story reframes sections of the river through its alternative pasts, and as a whole, contests the effects of tourism, bolstered by national history, which have reduced this multidimensional site into a single line on the map.

Projections: Singapore River (2009)

While Koh's project reclaims aspects of the site lost to omissions, Felicia Toh's *Projections* is strategically positioned in the future. Toh's fascination with Pulau Saigon, a small island on the southern bank of the river, which was gradually erased from the city's memory and its maps, spurred her investigation into how the current river, whose shape was once "dynamic and convoluted," acquired its almost uniform contours, through the taming, reclaiming and straightening out of a complex topography, all in the name of efficiency and high yields.³⁶

Using a series of drawings and models, *Projections* takes current river-related urban proposals to their utopian (or dystopian) extremes (Figures 4 and 5). It fetishizes luxurious waterfront living, gravity-defying waterscaped rooftop reservoirs and kitschy "prosperous waterfall features."³⁷ Presenting the river as a malleable natural-artificial reserve, Toh's work parodies this site as one that can be all that one wants it to be since it "readily ingests the various technologies harvested to manipulate its boundaries."³⁸ Hence, "What will the river be like, a hundred years into the future?" if it persists as a tool used for "placat(ing) society's desires for lucrative tourism and breathtaking scenic views"?³⁹

Drawings and models, the staples of architectural representation, are used here to effect the "palpable immediacy" of utopian fantasies, thus bringing into focus ever more audacious side effects of aggressive architectural intervention on this once natural topography.⁴⁰

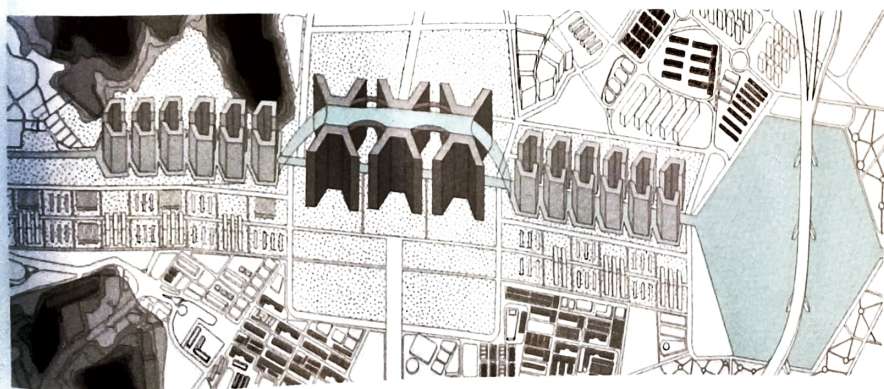


Figure 4: Felicia Toh, *Projections: Singapore River, "Future River"* — digital print on paper

Figure 5: Felicia Toh,
Projections:
Singapore River,
morphological models



***Jalan Kubor* (2008)**

Jalan Kubor by Hanan Alsagoff revolves around one of the oldest Malay/Muslim cemeteries in Singapore reputedly founded between 1819 and 1820 when Sultan Hussein and his followers settled in the Kampong Glam district, also allegedly the burial ground of the Malay kings. In 1827, the new North Bridge Road separated the sultan's (king's) palace from the burial ground (Figure 6). There are claims that the site functions as *wakaf* burial land, which according to Muslim law, must be preserved in perpetuity, but the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority's 2003 Masterplan shows plans for its redevelopment into residential property.



Figure 6: Hanan
Alsagoff, *Jalan Kubor*,
digital print on
photographic paper

Presently, over at least a hundred “celebrated” tombs of leading Malay and Muslim citizens exist here. These tombs (*ziyara*, or sites of visitation) are covered with yellow cloth and often raised on a plinth. Some of the tombs are widely perceived within the Malay community as *keramat* (holy shrines). While the cemetery is often found deserted, evidences of recent offerings and adornment of tombs are not uncommon.

Alsagoff’s site-specific project seeks to reconnect the cemetery with the Malay enclave. 20 viewing boxes containing photographic details from the cemetery are placed along a trail, which starts from the new heart of the enclave, the Malay Heritage Centre, and terminates at Jalan Kubor, its ancient origin. The trail, riding on the wave of heritage walking tours, links all the major spaces in the enclave with those buried in the cemetery. Through a peephole in the box, spectators are offered intimate views of the burial site, which are as haunting as they are beautiful. Critical and macabre, *Jalan Kubor* raises questions about the burial ground’s significance for the surviving community today as much as it highlights an important but now disregarded, and physically severed, past.

Reconstructing the Fragments (2009)

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.⁴¹

The personal account by Lee Ling Wei’s mother situates the extraordinary spatio-temporal context of a series of fires, which ravaged many homes in Singapore between 1958 and 1968. These *kampong* (village) fires brought about much devastation on human and economic scales, and an estimated 42,600 people were displaced.⁴² Despite their significant impact, documentation of these fires is scarce, and the urban transformation of these “squatter settlements” (the official term for *kampong*) into modern public housing areas is similarly patchy. Little is known about the fires at Kampong Koo Chai (April 1958), Kampong Tiong Bahru (February 1959), Bukit Ban Kee (March 1963), Pulau Minyak (November 1964), and Bukit Ho Swee (May 1961, 1968). Many of the affected sites were also rapidly redeveloped into public housing areas, and all traces of the fires subsequently disappeared from the nation’s collective memory with the emergence of the highly successful public housing landscape, which reputedly sprung up within months of these tragedies.

Reconstructing the Fragments enters the fray by questioning “the spectators’ expectation of the circumstances leading up to, and following, the *kampong* fires.”⁴³ It redeploys the sites and situations surrounding these disasters by juxtaposing a series of photographic images picturing contemporary public housing sites against a selection of archival anecdotes, folktales and personal narratives related to the historical events, the latter constituting fragmentary but crucial site evidence (Figure 7). At first appearance, the glossy photographs of the housing blocks resemble promotional material lauding the success story of Singapore public housing. There is however a twist as each photograph is carefully staged with the

[left, text]

Figure 7:

Lee Ling Wei,
*Reconstructing the
Fragments*, Tiong
Bahru Fire, 1959,
excerpt from archival
text

Tiong Bahru Fire, 1959

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 caves
of the shop.¹

Assemblyman
for Tiong Bahru,
Mr. William Tan
had a narrow escape
when a
pain-crazed cow,
charged at him
but missed.²

The village barber,
Low Liew Wan, 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.³



[right up, image]

Figure 8:

Lee Ling Wei,
*Reconstructing the
Fragments*, Bukit Ho
Swee, 2009, digital
print on photographic
paper

[right down, image]

Figure 9:

Lee Ling Wei,
*Reconstructing the
Fragments*, Pulau
Minyak, 2009, digital
print on photographic
paper

¹"15 Acres of Kampong Houses Guttled By Fire,"
Singapore Standard,
14 February 1959, p.5.

²"8'pore Fri. 13th Fire Tragedy,"
Singapore Standard,
14 February 1959, p.1.

³"Huts were too closed together,"
The Straits Times,
February 14 1959, p.2

6. CONCLUSION

In the SSS program, students were tasked to engage the question of historicity through a contemporary reading of site. In so doing, they explored creative and critical modes of site representation and fabrication, which ultimately also encompassed a sense of each space's future relevance as well as a quiet acknowledgement of its historicity. The value of this Janus-faced perspective cannot be overemphasized in the Asian context where polemical views of history (the past) versus progress (the future) are often oppositional rather than constructive, the former tending toward reification while the latter edges toward complete *tabula rasa*.

The emphasis on an embodied relationship with context defines the constitution of "site." In this instance, the rarified notion of an essential "Asian" space becomes increasingly superfluous. Site, and by extension, space, is encountered as intrinsic to the fluid formation of group, as well as individual identities. The construction of Asian space is thus inextricable from the subjects who encounter, occupy, perceive and give meaning to it. And while one is always physically grounded to a place, the global flows of information and capital suggest that our worldviews are ultimately influenced by such transnational relationships. What seems more urgent to the definition of Asian space is the subject's relationship to this space, in particular, its history and its future. It is crucial that perceptions of Asian space should move beyond the ready stock of oppositional stances such as traditional-modern or historical-progressive to embrace the fluid agency and interventions of the contemporary subject who occupies or operates within this milieu.

Hence, through a proactive understanding of site, history is individually encountered rather than presented a priori. It is "activated" anew through considered actions and methods, which remain particular to a specific locality and temporality. In this way, history conceptualized in relation to architectural design and its interpretive modes of site, moves beyond the abstract into more material and subjective realms, palpable to current renovation and reinvention. This methodology is evidence of how Asian architecture, at least in the Singapore context, with an eye toward the future and a conscience toward the past, can remain in relative equilibrium.

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3. The land reclamation issue in Singapore has also been the subject of dispute between the island and its two neighboring countries, Malaysia and Indonesia.

4. Lee Weng Choy, "Time, Landscape and Desire in Singapore," in *The Bodiless Dragon: Singapore Views on the Urban Landscape*, ed. Trevor Smith (Antwerp: Pandora, 1998), pp. 54–5.
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6. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 129.
7. Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004, 2007), p. 319.
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9. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, 2004), pp. 1–9.
10. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. xi.
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12. See Kwon, *One Place after Another*, p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
14. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 4.
15. See T.K. Sabapathy and Cecily Briggs, *Cheo Chai-Hiang: Thoughts and Processes (Rethinking the Singapore River)* (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Singapore Art Museum, 2000), p. 11.
16. Cheo Chai-Hiang, *Singapore River* (2006), plaque accompanying installation shown at the Singapore Biennale 2006.
17. See Ching's project for the 2009 President's Young Talent exhibition at 8Q SAM gallery. Available at <<http://www.pyt.sg/twardzik.php>> [accessed 17 August 2009].
18. See Kwon, *One Place after Another*, p. 29.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
20. Burns and Kahn, "Why Site Matters?," p. xii.
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30. Nurul Huda Abdul Rashid, "The Ambiguous 'Alternative': A Method to Narrative Others," in *Site, Situation, Spectator*, p. 10.
31. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. xiii, cited by Abdul Rashid, "The Ambiguous 'Alternative,'" p. 9. Emphasis added.
32. Abdul Rashid, "The Ambiguous 'Alternative,'" p. 10.
33. Lilian Chee, "Making History Present," in *Site, Situation, Spectator*, p. 8.
34. Kenneth Koh Qibao, "The Seven Bridges: Guide to the Singapore River," in *Site, Situation, Spectator*, p. 14.
35. Abdul Rashid, "The Ambiguous 'Alternative': A Method to Narrative Others," p. 11.
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40. Ibid.
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