

Materializing the Tiger in the Archive: Creative Research and Architectural History

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‘Invention is the only true intellectual act’

(Serres 1997, 92).

In 2003, I began my doctoral research on the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, a listed monument which had undergone extensive conservation and restoration works approximately a decade ago. I had intended to learn more about the architectural history of this building type – it being a grand hotel – with particular emphasis on its role as a social condenser during the golden age of colonial travel in Singapore and Malaya, specifically around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of its more intriguing spaces was the old Billiard Room, which had achieved far-flung fame as the spot where the last tiger was shot in urban Singapore.

It was reported in the local broadsheet that the infamous incident took place in August 1902 when a tiger, escaping from a native circus act stationed near the Beach Road reclamation site, took refuge in the undercroft space of the Billiard Room. The beast was spotted by one of the hotel’s bar ‘boys’, ‘staring through the low verandah railing on the hotel side of the Billiard Room’ (*Straits Times*, 1902). In no time, Mr C.M. Phillips, the head teacher from one of Singapore’s leading boys’ school, the Raffles Institution located near the hotel’s premises, was summoned to the scene from his slumber. He had been to a fancy dress ball the night before at the Government House and was still nursing his hangover when he was called to the emergency. Dressed in his pyjamas, the head teacher proved to be a poor marksman as he aimed, fired, and missed the tiger several times, hitting the brick pillars of the building instead. After he managed to finally kill the beast, the tiger’s body was dragged out from under the Billiard Room by nervous bystanders.

There were neither photographs of the ill-fated tiger nor of the uncoordinated head teacher. There was also no taxidermic specimen of the prized trophy. All that remains of this historical incident is the newspaper report, which offers a blow-by-blow account of this ‘hunt’. The ambivalent report, titled ‘Shot at Raffles Hotel – Under the Billiard Room’, gives the impression that the reporter and the hotel crowd were not impressed by Phillips’s forlorn performance. Instead, sympathies resided with the majestic

beast fondly nicknamed 'Stripes', which was admired for his enviable length of 'tip to tip 7 feet 8 inches, and 5 feet 4 inches in height', and rather than being a menace, was reportedly terrified of the crowd until he was rudely shot.

As I immersed myself in the historical material surrounding this space, I became increasingly frustrated with the lack of fit between what I had expected of an architectural archive and what was ultimately available. It seemed that apart from the architectural drawings, which documented the gradual expansion of the space to accommodate the game's heightened popularity during the first decade of the twentieth century, the research material connected with the Billiard Room comprised the odd newspaper report or two, and primarily a collection of anecdotal fragments recounting the tiger incident, which was later backed up by contemporary cartoons and children's fables.

Today, tiger lore thrives in the hotel. In its shop, there are cuddly tigers, t-shirts with tiger prints and tiger posters on sale. The Billiard Room continues to honor the game by keeping two tables, one marked as an 'original' dating back to the time of Stripes' visit. A tiger-themed billiard exhibition match was hosted here in the 1980s. At the bar, guests drink out of mugs emblazoned with a tiger motif, and patrons are given keepsake matchboxes which feature an image of a tiger accompanied by a question that keeps the guests curious: 'Was there really a tiger under the billiard table?' The tiger story has also inspired a series of contemporary cartoons and two illustrated volumes of children's stories – Kathy Creamer's *The Tiger who Came to Tea* (1995) and Kelly Choppard's *Terry's Raffles Adventures* (1996). During the hotel's centenary celebrations in 1986, a white female Bengal tiger from a visiting circus act was roped in by the hotel's manager Roberto Pregarz, who dressed himself up as a colonial hunter, to re-enact the primal scene from a hundred years before (*Straits Times*, 1986). Stories about where the tiger was shot became so widespread that the whereabouts of the beast shifted from under the Billiard Room to *under* the billiard *table*. Given that the Billiard Room was operational between 1896 and 1917, then only reinstalled in 1989, these remarkable stories are amongst those that have circulated in the intervening seventy years when this space was physically non-existent. Thus, during this interim period, the Billiard Room effectively existed as a footnote to its tiger stories.

'In the middle, between things...'

On first impressions, the material related to the Billiard Room was 'useless' since the anecdotes fell outside the conventional framework of the architectural archive. There were two glaring discrepancies. The anecdote, firstly, was not a normative document issued by the architect – these being conventionally accepted as drawings, models, briefs, and instructions dealing with the design or with the construction of the building. An anecdote, secondly, is viewed suspiciously in historical work because it cannot be verified. The anecdote, as architectural historian Barbara Penner (2005) points out, is often alienated in academic discourse. Dictionary definitions link the anecdote to 'a tendency to

tell too many stories', and oppose it to 'corroborated evidence or proof' (*The New Penguin Dictionary* 2001, 48). And yet, in conversations, interviews and stories which persistently arose during my research, the tiger incident remained intransigent. In short, the Billiard Room would not be in the forefront of our imagination today without the tiger.

Nevertheless, situating the research within the realms of architectural history proved challenging in 'a research paradigm ... (where) knowledge and creativity are conceived as mutually exclusive' (Carter 2004, 8). The discipline of architectural history with its emphases on formal design lineage and influences, finds little relevance in such evidence, which summarily put, has 'nothing to do' with 'Architecture', and even less with its history. At the same time, there is almost no discussion about the compatibility of architectural historical research methods which privilege distance and objectivity, as well as the centrality of the architect and the design/building, as opposed to the practice of architectural design which tends to value subjectivity, self-reflexivity, experience, and instinct.¹

Consequently, the former methodology restricts the types of evidence and findings which may matter to the discipline, thus precluding, in this instance, the reproduction of the Billiard Room through the means by which it has been consumed. In their paper, 'Detecting Architecture', architectural historians Penner and Charles Rice (2009) question 'the centrality of architecture in architectural history', proposing instead that the discipline of architectural history consider architecture's 'background effect', that is, to understand the elusiveness of 'architecture as an object of historical inquiry', and that 'a change in the nature of the inquiry' may be needed. If the discipline of architectural history takes into account tangential developments related to an architectural object's production such as the effects of technology on its construction, the architect's political and cultural influences, and the client's requirements, it would, I argue, be sensible to also consider how this object – a building or a space – continues to be reproduced after its construction through subsequent consumption, occupancy and use. In this sense, architectural history's conventional affiliation with the architectural profession and art historical scholarship may benefit from techniques and modes of evidence relevant to other spatially-inclined disciplines such as geography, cultural history and the history of science, for example.

Additionally, I suggest an understanding of architectural history as a temporal activity which is bound to a specific encounter between the historian and her object of study for as much as we 'historicize our objects of study', we also need to historicize 'our own embedding in history' (Gallop 2002, 89). Architectural historical knowledge is produced *both* through scholarly interpretation as well as through visceral means, for example, the historian may have the opportunity to physically occupy or psychologically inhabit an architectural object or space. However, even as the historian's role as experiencing subject is key to such knowledge production, the notions of subjectivity and experience are frequently masked in architectural discourse, which prioritizes the figure of the architect as author (Burns 1996). Thus, the architectural historian's experience is conventionally directed toward understanding either the architect's intentions

or skills, or the historical significance of the building in a wider political, social, cultural or economic circumstance.

Rather than being limited by these disciplinary conventions, which have to do with intentionality and significance, I argue for the capacity to theorize and historicize a building or a space as one finds it, or to begin the research as it were, 'into the middle of things', that is, to allow a critical position to emerge out of such experience. This critical mode is akin to what Walter Benjamin (1996, 3-5; 1999, 159-62) calls the 'lived experience', that is, the experience of a present or a moment in time (*Erlebnis*) privileged over experience shared or accumulated through tradition (*Erfahrung*); for example, one mediated by the limits of architectural history. In another context, literary theorist Jane Gallop (2002, 5) describes this lived activity as 'occasional' because it is linked to a particular moment rather than simply attached to a 'familiar narrative', and '... the moment is in fact an opening – the occurrence of something new, something surprising' (Gallop 2002, 85). Similarly, feminist literary critic Nancy Miller (1991, xi-xii) reminds us that 'the fallout of the event' creates 'the chance for something to happen in the wedge of unpredictability not yet foreclosed by ... discourse'.

At the same time, the notion of 'evidence' is conventionally limited to that which is recognized by a potential narrative (Scott 1994, 366). Hence, an established architectural narrative predetermines its modes of evidence, and consequently, controls the formation of what can, or cannot, be constituted as a legitimate architectural subject. Yet back at the Billiard Room, I was reluctant to dismiss its unruly evidence for two reasons. Firstly, the anecdotes gestured to a specifically feminine mode of knowledge which was circulated primarily by word-of-mouth resulting in a network of stories. I also observed that these stories empowered the teller and her audience, enabling both to gain imaginative access to an otherwise limited space, which customarily welcomed only men of certain status. Secondly, the newspaper report and its later spin-offs portrayed the colonial hunter, a masculine figure emblematic of the gendered Billiard Room, as somehow flawed or emasculated.

Feminist cultural theorist Meaghan Morris (1988, 7) suggests that anecdotes are not mere expressions of 'personal experience' but 'can be put to show up the contours of a social terrain', that is to say, anecdotes can map precisely a 'discursive context' and represent 'allegorical expositions of a model of the way in which the world can be said to be working'. Gallop (2002, 8) tells us that the anecdotal is 'exorbitant', that is to say, it is linked to 'exteriority ... exits, departure, attempts to get out, and in particular the attempt to get out of a rut'. What is more, Gallop's description of the anecdotal is also insistently gendered. Hence, anecdotes manifest ways of saying what may be otherwise censored or repressed.

As a consequence of both the method (the anecdotal storytelling) and the content (the botched up job of slaying the tiger), the insularity of the Billiard Room as a sacrosanct male domain was ultimately disturbed.

In relation to these aspects and following an expanded definition of the discipline, the Billiard Room's 'architectural history' could never be just about design motivations and methods. In effect, how this space was subsequently consumed reveals as much, or more, as how it was initially produced. It intrigued me especially that this masculine space relied heavily on repressed feminine foundations – the power of its anecdotes, the persistence of storytelling as its primary mode of dissemination, and the centrality of the untamed beast in the founding of this genteel space. Rather than reinforce a familiar narrative revolving around the genius of a colonial architect operating in the midst of an alien socio-political context, how could I intervene with, and expose, the Billiard Room's alternative foundations?

'By making a model you will have the opportunity, thoroughly to weigh and consider the form and situation'

(Alberti 1986, 22).

Taking the evidence of the tiger as key, I attempted to locate physical traces of the animal in the Billiard Room today. This exercise raised the unlikely but significant evidence of the billiard table, an original relic which was retained by the hotel to mark the infamous tiger incident. After many rounds of enthusiastic storytelling, it was erroneously accepted that the ill-fated tiger had been shot *under the billiard table* rather than under the Billiard Room. As history making and storytelling gradually became undifferentiated, this piece of fiction stuck and became 'fact' in the Billiard Room's founding fable. In essence, the table is a surrogate for the missing animal, and it restructures the experience of this room. Thus, I sought to examine the table as both a material artifact and a metaphorical frame.

Responding materially to this unusual piece of evidence, I constructed a third archive – a series of miniaturized models of the billiard table, which could supplement, or subvert, the existing holdings in the hotel's museum (the newspaper reports and cartoons) and the state's archive (the architectural drawings and photographs). The architectural model is central to the representation of an architectural idea. The model is, above all, concerned with the perfection of form. As Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' and Le Corbusier's 'Modulor' – two exemplary models – suggest, architectural models are also primarily androcentric. Models are idealized finished forms which are made to be encased, admired and fetishized. The original, disused billiard table at the hotel currently also serves as a model, since it stands for the idealized values of a masculine, colonial past. As with design practice, the model is also conventionally employed in historical research as a representation of a finite form, often as reconstructions of lost cities or demolished buildings, thus resurrecting an idealized condition whereby the building or city is relatively intact. I was intrigued by the kind of 'model' which would best represent the Billiard Room given its association with the tiger. Would this model promise *utilitas*, *firmitas* and *venustas*? Would it possess a gender?

8.1 White-wash
(wooden table,
'white' undercoat
primer, applied
evenly four times
over four days)



8.2 Mud
(wooden table,
caked mud from
garden, baked
under the sun
for ten hours)





8.3 Stripes
(wooden table,
100% Cotton Print
from Liberty's
'Indian Stripes'
Collection,
glued on)



8.4 Meat
(wooden table,
expired minced
meat mixed
with corn flour,
table disposed
due to stench)

8.5 Black Fur
(wooden table,
black matted
faux fabric fur,
glued on)



To this end, I crafted a series of model billiard tables which were carefully covered with matter denied by conventional architectural historical research, in this case, matter connected to the tiger anecdote – fabric patterned in distinctive ‘stripes’ recalling Mr Philips’ pyjamas and the tiger’s nickname, mud associated with the dark undercroft space of the original Billiard Room, and the body of the beast represented by (faux) fur and rotting meat. These extraordinary coverings were exhibited together with a white-washed model, whose pristine finish is status quo in architectural representation (Figure 8.1).

By re-appropriating the model, which is one of the most important architectural tools for experimenting with, and ultimately to achieve an idealized architectural form, these model tables were subject to formal experiments with the aim of revealing what was ‘Other’ to the architectural space of the Billiard Room. The conventional categories of architectural model making, for example, materiality, scale, solidity, functionality and likeness, were subverted in these experiments.

More importantly, I also began to internalize the complex gendered reproduction of the Billiard Room through its tiger anecdotes since the act of making raises ‘a complex of interactions 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’ (Morris 1993, 75). The model tables were performative in the way they underscored the extraordinary and often alienated matter (dirt, filth, fur) surrounding the subsequent reproduction and perception of the Billiard Room in the wake of the tiger’s visit.

The models also highlighted a metaphorical frame for re-reading the Billiard Room. With the disappearance of the building’s undercroft space following renovations undertaken in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the billiard table assumes the status of the imaginative object onto which the animal

anecdote hinges. Significantly, the technical specifications for a billiard table reiterate the importance of its uprightness, solidity, firmness, elegant design and the smoothness of its surface to ensure the precision, speed and accuracy of the game (Crawley 1977, 12; Gillett 1996, 5-6). It is striking that there is a resemblance between the qualities of a sturdy billiard table and the Vitruvian (1999, 26) principles of architecture, the latter similarly exalting beauty, commodity, uprightness, firmness and strength as architectural virtues. Another important meaning of the word 'table' is 'tabula', that is, a ground, or a foundation. Metaphorically, a perspective of the room from 'under the table' implies an upside down view. It reflects a child's perspective, which may explain why the animal story survives most vividly today as part of a collection of children's stories. It challenges what is upright, normal and orderly. Something that is 'under the table' can also be something that is ultimately hidden or repressed, and to turn the tables on someone or something suggests a subversive reversal of positions. The awkward perspective produced from 'under the table' necessitates a conceptual recasting of the room's foundations.

The model is a miniaturized world concomitant with nostalgic versions of childhood. It made me aware of the possible political significance of contemporary juvenile literature which also revisited the original tiger incident. In the late 1990s, following major restoration work at the hotel, the Billiard Room featured as an architectural centerpiece for two volumes of children's fiction – Creamer's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, and Choppard's *Terry's Raffles Adventures*. These stories reenact the historical scenes within the Billiard Room by using humour and caricature to parody the overblown sense of self-importance and power invested in particular colonial identities. As cultural theorist Steve Baker (1993, 123-4) and feminist writer Ursula Le Guin (1990, 10) reiterate, to identify with the animal is ultimately to consort with an inexplicable 'Other', specifically with 'women, children and animals'. The Billiard Room cannot be divorced from its animal, and also thus, implicated in the feminized foundations of this 'Other'. As these newly written 'animal stories' are circulated to another generation of readers, it is equally important to consider how a masculine hunting tale is transformed so that now, the Billiard Room would be inevitably encountered in gendered terms, since these stories were written for, and read by, an Other, that is, they were written to be read to children by their mothers. As such, the tiger anecdote is a subversive instrument, despite appearing in its most benign form as a child's story.

Even as the subject matter of the Billiard Room and its colonial 'hunt' are outwardly hostile to feminist practices, in privileging subjectivity, emergent instinct and the ability to reveal the space's repressed feminine foundations, these methods and their outcomes are not only implicitly feminist in orientation but also develop trajectories in architectural history which embrace 'personally situated, interdisciplinary, and diverse and emergent approaches (that) often contradict what is expected of research' (Barrett 2007, 2).

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Notes

- 1 Recent discourse revolving around creative research is scarce, with notable publications by Barrett and Bolt (2007), Carter (2004) and Rendell (2010), which explore the intersections of art, dance, creative writing and film with academic research.