SUSTAINING PUBLICS AND THEIR SPACES: WILLIAM LIM'S WRITINGS ON ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE

BY LILIAN CHEE

1 In his notes to the translation, Brian Massumi suggests that the 'order-word' is used by Deleuze and Guattari literally in a double sense: 'a word or phrase constituting a command or a word or phrase creative of order'. Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press, 1999, p.76 and p.523.

The dilemma of 'order-words' according to Gilles Deleuze is that it not only defines a problem but also over-determines the answers to that problem. For Deleuze, the order-word simultaneously refers to a word that constitutes a command, as well as one which creates its own universe of order.[1] In this sense, society's 'order-words' ultimately control not only *how* we can articulate a problem (our forms of expression), but also restricts *what* we can know (our forms of content). Recently, 'sustainability' has been circulating as the order-word of the moment both in architectural academia and in practice. An important concept which rallies around the urgent protection, continuity and cultivation of our rapidly depleting natural resources, 'sustainability' is subsequently associated with specific tools, methods and outcomes which are used to preserve the natural world.

Thus, when retired architect, activist and writer William Lim critiques that environmental sustainability achieved primarily through technological measures may 'displace historical, social and cultural traditions', he does not just knowingly muddle up the use of 'sustainability' but simultaneously expands its reach and relevance towards non-ecological and non-natural areas, which Lim argues, are equally in need of protection. Contentiously, Lim maintains that a nation's culture, history and society must be included within sustainability discussions as these aspects are equally at risk. He advocates that architecture must necessarily tackle the issue of sustainability within this expanded field. To do so, architects need to adopt a much broader social and cultural remit, which extends far beyond the formal aesthetics and fiscal concerns that dictate much of quotidian architectural production.

At a glance, Lim's writings, which accompany other essays on public space in this volume, appear dissipated in their focus. From the articulation of global issues pertinent to the Singapore built environment and economy, to deliberations on space and its happiness quotient, rights to the city, and the indispensability of creativity as a way of life, his voice is lucid and insistent. The texts position Singapore at the cusp of something new and exciting — a global player to be reckoned with, and chart its steady progress from periphery to centre on the world stage. Yet Lim is anxious that these shiny trophies may jeopardize the real McCoy which is about building a space, a city, and a home that draws people to plant roots, grow families, be happy, grow old, live meaningful lives, and be able to grasp a foreseeable future.

'Sustainable' space and architecture, in Lim's argument, must be available to the masses. It must be made public. In another recent article, Lim warns of the impending standardization and inequality that accompanies the culture of 'star architecture' tethered to capitalist profiteering:

> Notwithstanding the dramatic aesthetic experiments by star-architects, the overall generic similarity of these projects in these sites can be easily substituted for each other. Furthermore, these public spaces are generated and moulded according to the needs of capitalism and subordinate to the logic of maximum profits. They are highly regulated and unaffordable to the lower-income.[2]

2 William Lim, "Public Space in Urban Asia", unpublished draft, 6 December 2012.

Lim dangles other trade-offs as incentives for better design, more inclusive spaces, a city which is accommodating and forgiving in its embrace of the non status quo including migrants, older people, and the creative set. He proposes the organic development of the city from a bottom-up approach, citing a more vibrant and productive society as sustainable and lasting outcomes.

Over the last half decade, Lim has fervently charted social change in relation to rapid urbanization and globalization of Asian cities, with particular focus on Singapore. In fact, as early as in 1966, Lim and his ex-partner Tay Kheng Soon started an independent multi-disciplinary think tank to discuss the consequences of urban planning in Singapore. Called the Singapore Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) group, the quorum independently conducted in-depth research on issues such as public housing, industrialization, land use, transportation and population projections as a means to understand how planning could be equitable and egalitarian. It published its findings in two journals (*SPUR 65-67* and *SPUR 68-71*), forwarding recommendations and criticism on landmark projects such as the relocation of the proposed international airport from Paya Lebar to Changi, and the implementation of an island-wide mass rapid transit system.

In that sense, Lim's current musings in this volume — some implemented, others speculative — may be read as alternative tributaries into rethinking how space and architecture can be sustained, and remain sustainable, for future generations in land-scarce Singapore. He has actively lobbied for a fundamental rethinking of the role of architects, planners and citizens in the mutual shaping and occupation of public space. Blunt as they may be in comparison with

the latest technological apparati for climate control and carbon footprint, his writings (which incidentally recapitulate the sharpness but also the naiveté of the SPUR papers) advocate the relevance and survival of public space as a site for hands-on action and participation that will, in turn, sustain the fragile city and its surrounding areas.

Yet what is 'public space'? Who is invoked by 'the public'? Where is it located, particularly in the Asian context where the dichotomies of private-public hold vastly nuanced meanings from their non-Asian counterparts? These are all problematic questions just as 'public opinion' is '"present as such in none of the spaces" where it is held to be'.[3] The Asian home, for instance, is often the site of inter-generational occupation and state intervention, and under these circumstances, one may feel it is even more 'public' than the street wherein individual identity and anonymity

3 Derrida, Jacques. "La démocratie ajournée," in *L'Autre Cap*. Paris: Minuit, 1991, p.103, cited in Robbins, "Introduction", p.xii.

EXPRESSING IDENTITY, RECOGNIZING HERITAGE, GATHERING, SHOPPING, CREATING, CULTIVATING, PASSING-BY OR AVOIDING, ARE ALL WAYS OF BEING IN PUBLIC SPACES WHICH ARTICULATE CITIZEN INTERESTS AND MATTERS OF CONCERN.

may be preserved. Nevertheless, even as terms like 'general public', 'public opinion' and 'public space' are viewed with suspicion, perceived as specters, and often denigrated as abstract, 'the public' is certainly, as Lim and countless others before him such as Habermas, Sennett, Bloom, Arendt, Lippmann, Fraser and Young have argued, a lynchpin in radical struggles over architecture, urbanism, education, welfare, health reforms and economics, amongst others.[4] The spectral public has been instrumental as,

> ... a rallying cry against private greed, ...for general welfare as against propertied interests, ...for openness to scrutiny as opposed to corporate and bureaucratic secrecy, an arena in which disenfranchised minorities struggle to express their cultural identity, a code word for socialism.[5]

Lim's essays about his public are impassioned but not antagonistic. He does not detail the complexities of his alluded 'public' but one may infer that he is thinking these issues through the neutral body politic of Singapore's citizenry. This is an entity which has been specifically

4 See Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989; Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2003; Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Soils of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987; Lippmann, Walter. The Phantom Public. New York: Macmillan, 1927; Fraser, Nancy, "Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas", *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 595–612; Young, Iris Marion. "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory". In *Feminism as Critique*. Eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

5 Robbins, Bruce. "Introduction: The Public as Phantom". *In The Phantom Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.x.

conditioned by its media, state policies, social and cultural norms, as well as the city's rapidly changing spatial environment. Lim must also be acutely aware, though he does not explicitly say so, that this is a public which immediately exercises exclusion of what is non status quo, or as Iris Marion Young suggests, such an impartial and shapeless public makes those who are particular and different 'glaringly visible' because such 'will to unity' does not tolerate 'desire, affectivity and the body' which are viewed as opposed to a brand of 'reason' that must be upheld for the good of a general public.[6]

Young warns that voice is inherently given to groups who are 'materially privileged' since 'formal democratic processes often elevate the particular experiences and perspective of privileged groups, silencing or denigrating those of oppressed groups'.[7] In fact, the idea of a unified homogeneous Singaporean public is already in itself flawed as 'every social group has group

THE PRACTICE OF RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCE AS 'SPECIFICITY, OR VARIATION' INSTEAD OF ESSENTIALIZING DIFFERENCE AS A FLAWED DEPARTURE FROM WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS THE COMMON CULTURE, IS IMPORTANT.

differences cutting across it, which are potential sources of wisdom, excitement, conflict, and oppression'.[8] As Young illustrates, 'Gay men, for example, may be Black, rich, homeless, or old, and these differences produce different identifications and potential conflicts among gay men, as well as affinities with some straight men'.[9]

The practice of recognizing difference as 'specificity, or variation' instead of essentializing difference as a flawed departure from what is perceived as the common culture, is important.[10] In this respect, Lim's recent writing has focused on the relational understanding of Singapore's pluralistic society played out through their occupation within, and affinities towards, specific spaces and enclaves. The politics of race, class, gender and sexuality are visibly enacted in the conceptualization, allocation, sharing and interpretation of spaces including mundane categories like housing, workplaces, and what is vaguely bracketed as public space. Public space, as Lim points out, is not democratic but rather supported by commodity capital, and thus installs a persistent class barrier.

6 Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public", p.66.

7 Young, Iris Marion. "Justice and the Politics of Difference". In *Gender and Planning: A Reader*. Eds. Isa J. Servon and Susan S. Fainstein. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005, p.94.

8 Young, Iris Marion. "Social Movements: Politics of Difference". In *The City Cultures Reader*. Eds. Iain Borden, Tim Hall and Malcolm Miles. New York: Routledge, 2000, p.321.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, p.320.

He highlights the problematic perspective of a single or unified public in Singapore. This conception is unrealistic given the city's 'escalating number of permanent residents and foreign workers', and as such this 'pluralistic identity' needs to be tolerantly mined, allowing differences to be recognized and valued as opposed to being simply assimilated into a perceived majority.[11] What is exciting about Lim's advocacy of heterogeneous publics, participation without assimilation, the development of a multi-cultural literacy, the empowerment of specific social groups (including migrant workers, foreign domestic help, permanent residents, and singles) and an epistemology of multiplicity, which includes the mobilization of communities in tandem with state-directed planning is that it is discussed not just for the sake of discussion. These issues are inherently brought into a pragmatic framework, and always unequivocally directed at architects, urban planners, the state, and the citizenry as these groups imagine, create, occupy and negotiate the spaces of the city and its fringes.

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ALSO REMINDS US OF THE COMPELLING THREADS OF COMMONALITY BETWEEN ASIAN PUBLIC SPACES AND THEIR COUNTERPARTS ELSEWHERE.

Lim's vision for a socially conscious public sphere is a very tall order but perhaps not entirely unachievable given the tenacity of his Singapore public, which he is clearly still optimistic about. Here and elsewhere, Lim gives his reader vivid glimpses of already thriving public spaces like the *kopi tiam* (coffee shops), hawker centres, wet markets, and public housing void decks where local practices, customs and culture flourish amidst more structured routines and spaces.

At the same time, these writings are obviously located outside the realm of Lim's own architectural discipline and training. They do not claim interdisciplinarity as much as they intentionally punch above their own weight in a bid to situate architecture at the forefront of other related knowledges — technological, political, social, cultural, anthropological, geographical. The stewardship of public space — which Lim still believes lies primarily in the hands of architects — must be responsibly handled if this space is to be safeguarded from capitalist greed and exclusivity. It means that such spaces must be prioritized and programmed for inclusive use, rather than being simply residual to privately owned sites and functioning only in a symbolic capacity.

11 Lim, William S.W. "We are Singapore: Wet Market, Singlish, Kopitiam". In *Singapore Shifting Boundaries*. Eds. William S.W. Lim, Sharon Siddique and Tan Dan Feng. Singapore: Asian Urban Lab, p.3.

Ultimately, Lim's genuine contribution to his expanded sustainability debate is an insistence that architecture — in the ways it is commissioned, designed, practiced and managed — cannot remain at a standstill. It must be flexible and yet steadfast in making a fragile public sphere accessible to its constituent publics. These publics will be multiple in their orientations, and often overlapping or contradictory in their agendas and agencies. Together, they comprise the shifting parameters that define architecture's Sisyphean struggle towards at least one version of a sustainable future.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

1. Koh, David. "The Pavement as Civic Space: History and Dynamics in the City of Hanoi." In *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia*, eds. Michael Douglass, Kong-Chong Ho and Giok Ling Ooi, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 145–174.
2. Söderstrom, Ola and Geertman, Stephanie. *Loose Threads: The Translocal Making of Public Space in Hanoi*. Singapore: Asian Research Institute, 2012.