



Chee, Lilian 2023 *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces*. Oxford and New York: Routledge

Lilian Chee's *Architecture and Affect* (Routledge) speaks out of, and (primarily) back to, the discipline of architecture. Yet, it is also a book that has relevance to other fields—geography, cultural and visual studies, literary studies, visual art practice, anthropology. Chee's intellectual project in *Architecture and Affect* is to expose the “blind spots” of conventional architectural history and theory. She seeks to adjust the scope of interest and emphasis in that scholarship and to push back on its various assumptions. Chee does this by working through perspectives and scales that might normally be thought of as either supplementary to, or subsumed by, the conventional object and subject of architecture—the building and its variants. Although working primarily with Singaporean case material, Chee's book ranges further, productively taking detours here, there and everywhere.

Affect is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp theoretically, let alone to empirically instantiate with any consistency. Chee's take on this lively, if sometimes confusing realm of social theory, emphasizes the visceral and experiential exchanges that happen between subjects (human and nonhuman) and their encounters with spatial settings of all kinds. For Chee, affect is not just a user's emotional responses to architecture (although that is part of its definitional reach), but a wider feeling that architecture creates in the world. In Chee's hands, affect folds into practice, eventfulness, atmospheres, emotion. Chee lets this multiplicity of meanings flourish.

The theoretical framing of this book is serious minded and earnest and fully engages with some of the most jargon-laden and fussy areas of post-structural social theory. The opening chapter offers a *tour de force* of affect theory as it relates to a wider field of social and architectural theory. The challenges and difficulties are openly flagged by Chee alongside extremely helpful exegesis. I am certain that this chapter will be set by many a professor who needs their students to grasp this difficult field of theory. That said, not even Chee's careful navigation of affect theory can reduce the surfeit of terminology that burdens it. This chapter is a rewarding read but is likely best read with a supporting beverage in hand!

In theoretical framing and empirical realization, *Architecture and Affect* challenges disciplinary assumptions. This is because, historically speaking, “affective evidence” troubles architecture. The messy embodied experience of architecture does not comfortably find a legitimate place in the discipline's sense of itself. This difficulty, Chee argues, has resulted in certain disciplinary “blind spots.” This might be omissions of certain kinds of spaces and architectures, notably those not designed by the hand of the trained architect. Or it might be omissions of certain follow-on effects of architecture in the world, such as the affective aura of architecture: feelings, atmospheres, emotions, reactions, meanings associated with lived worlds. Chee argues that such “affective” architectures are troubling for conventional architecture (both as a discipline and a practice) because they comprise evidence that is “discrepant” with respect to its established paradigms. Chee's use of the word “discrepant” here is especially useful. The common meaning for discrepant is “inconsistent”, but deep in that word's etymology is the sense of “discordance” or “noisiness”. This is a book that intends to make “noise” and to gener-

ate “affect trouble” for the discipline of architecture. When Chee, as she puts it, “squints from the blind spots” of presupposed architectural concerns, she sets aside a range of assumed architectures: architecture as monument; architecture as (high) art; architecture as designed system; architecture as form; architecture as user experience data; architecture as intentioned design, and even; architecture as a field in control of its own history of forms and formation!

Chee has a nice way of describing the “architecture” that is of interest to her. It is the architecture that is “jammed” amongst life—what she calls “architecture-in-the-midst.” Understanding *this* affective architecture requires different types of evidence to that which is conventionally drawn upon by the discipline to evaluate architectural worth. This affective architecture also needs different techniques of “detection” and novel forms of recording and reportage. This methodological and representational demand is met in *Architecture and Affect* by a stunning display of visual experiments, some by Chee herself, some done in collaboration with artists, designers and filmmakers, namely, Toby Fong, Lin Derong, Lei Yuan Bin and Wong Zi Hao, Simryn Gill and Charles Lim. The emphasis in *Architecture and Affect* on visual analysis and communication is laudable. The images in this book document and evoke in ways that words cannot. They seize the world differently, telling us not simply that this is what the world looks like in form, but also *evoking* the experience of sensing that world: revulsion, nostalgia, delight, enchantment, uncanny discomfort. As such, the visuals of *Architecture and Affect* activate the verb form *knowing* as opposed to noun form *knowledge*. Its images convey echoed meanings, after images, something past, something yet-to-be, something beyond representation itself. Indeed, the reliance on visual images is one way *Architecture and Affect* pushes back on how architecture as a disciplinary field knows what it knows, and so, consequently, what knowledge it privileges or suppresses. As Chee puts it, her “subject matter is theory-producing, rather than being defined by theory”.

The more empirical chapters of *Architecture and Affect* usefully demonstrate the overarching theoretical argument. They offer detailed observational and interpretative accounts of the often obscure, lived worlds of Singapore's past and present. That storytelling sometimes tackles architecture as we might conventionally understand it—a building or morphology. But it is just as likely to by-pass conventional architectural forms and focus on nooks and crannies, sub-architectural features, wider atmospheres, contextualizing climates or transient fabrications. Because of this, the empirical sections of the book shuttle promiscuously between the real and the imagined, the concretely materialized and the representational, the actual and the metaphorical, the present and the past. This will delight some readers and annoy others. Regardless, Chee demonstrates how guest houses, hotels, cemeteries, railway stations, cemeteries, coastlines (and more) are sites of affective work. For example, Chee's account of the iconic Raffle's Hotel billiard room, focuses in on a sensational historical moment when a tiger entered the room—an incident now sutured into the hotel's ongoing reputational aura. This is not a standard architectural history of this colonial edifice. We see the building through the eye of the tiger and the humans it encountered. The architectural details brought into view include the building undercroft, the billiard room, even the space under the billiard table. Chee explains how the billiard room at Raffles Hotel still today acts as

a *point de capiton* suturing Singapore's colonial past into the present. Chee's reading of Raffles Hotel's billiard room is supplement by a visual collaboration with Tony Fong, entitled "*Tracing the Last Tiger. The images produced*". This essay offers a forensic, visual reconstruction of early Singaporean tiger encounters, the erratic information and partial perspectives of anecdotes, and their disputable material traces.

I would like to end this review by speaking of the disposition of this book. From the opening paragraph of *Architecture and Affect* there is something refreshingly open about what is at stake for Chee. *Architecture and Affect* is a book carefully and seriously grounded in big theoretical questions about the scope of architecture: what should be its matters of concerns and why; how should those concerns be accounted for, by whom and to what ends? This set of questions could readily have allowed Chee to occupy a position of "up there" authority: distant, jargon-filled, all-knowing and convinced of its rightness and ability to settle, once and for all, how it is. *Architecture and Affect* is not written with such alienating authority. There is authenticity in Chee's interest in transforming how architecture goes about its business, academically and professionally. *Architecture and Affect* is able to avoid the closure of "up-there" authority by the committed effort to activate affective and

event-based understandings of architecture: to present to us an architecture in the midst and always in the making. This brings into view, to use Chee's own words, "how people belong, how they experience attachment, manage anxiety, hold up hope and achieve security." These ambitions confirm that *Architecture and Affect* uses theory to achieve ethical outcomes. To take the affective register of architecture seriously is to build a monument to the everyday practices that are the oft unseen scaffolding that determines the fate of architecture: holding architecture in place (be that as a profession worthy of employment, a form in the world, an atmosphere, a fleeting experience or a sanctified memory) or contributing to its unmaking. These are the everyday practices of inhabitation and reiteration that *make* architecture in its fullest sense.

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