

Site Lines

Re-engaging Architecture, Art and Authorship

TEXT BY LILIAN CHEE

IMAGES COURTESY OF LILIAN CHEE, DEBBIE LOO, JAN LIM, HANAN ALSAGOFF AND JULIANA CHAN

In this piece, **Lilian Chee** examines the possibility of translating site-specific art's fluid, process-based conceptions of *site* into critical perspectives with potential for renovating architecture's engagement with and iterations of and *on site*. Accounts of four site-specific installations exploring relationships between public, space and practice in the recent Site, Situation, Spectator exhibition at NUS Museum annotate these meditations.

"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 lenses and then the frames."¹

In the academic design studio, the process of identifying, giving value and redefining an architectural site is frequently painstaking, a needle-in-the-haystack situation for many, or a happily serendipitous accident for others. However, once "found," site is often quickly glossed over for more weighty matters of issue, programme and tectonics. The point when *site* comes into play in the sequence of studio work is murky. Even when site is specifically emphasised for its political, cultural or social aspects, the studio brief usually does not, and indeed cannot, stop at ruminations, no matter how compelling, about a site. In actuality, site is the backdrop on which the work or design can take place, and so fully materialise. As such, site studies are frequently, no matter how thorough, instrumentalist in nature, and ultimately a means to an end – that is, they precede design only insofar as design gains materiality from the study of a site.

Design necessitates that we understand site as spatially finite, and that we respond to specific physical features whether natural or manmade. Yet, it also necessitates an opposing concept of site as "a contained parcel" that is "[in] contact with something tangibly much greater," and "a spatially and temporally expansive surround."² Site is hence a richly complex construct resonating on both physical and associative registers.

In discussing the design process in academic studio culture in this piece, I want to revisit the question of site not as a canvas of constraints and potentials but as *critical matter*, as legitimate and contested material, as having a particular materiality (both physical and conceptual) in

and of itself, before it is undermined by the singularity of the architectural solution. My proposition of site as critical matter derives from disciplinary training in one field (architecture) and personal interest in another (art). The notion 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 towards a purposeful "solution." However, while art may not be functional like architecture in the sense of providing shelter or accommodation, artistic perspectives, as Jane Rendell points out, do provide certain "tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and social change."³ In this instance, site-specific art's concept of the site as a *process* to be worked through (as opposed to a bounded area to be occupied) is an example of a critical perspective that may be creatively developed in the academic architectural studio.

In site-specific work, site is not so much given as it is to be *made*. It is not something which is already there. Under such circumstances, the site is to be constructed *through* the work: "this site is not a *precondition*. Rather it is generated by the work...and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation."⁴ Art historian and critic Miwon Kwon's definition of site is crucially generative: site unfolds as a process and our knowledge of it is informed by the work that does not merely respond to existing site forces and forms but also projectively fleshes out what the site might be. An example might be the micro sites that emerge out of the wrapped buildings/structures/land forms of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, which include the Reichstag in Berlin, the Pont Neuf in Paris, and most recently, Central Park in New York City. In their site work, not only are the materials and site conditions rigorously tested and researched (for example, the fabrics are constantly subjected to wind tunnel testing and the site heavily researched in order to determine its environmental conditions), but the scale, complex physical boundaries, and public access to politics, social and economic conditions, as well as the site's inherent power structures are paradoxically made evident as existing buildings/bridges/landforms are obscured in the couple's trademark fabric envelop.

In this sense, the kind of site work which Kwon alludes to, and which Christo and Jeanne-Claude's experiments lead on to, is necessarily anticipative or allegorical, and perhaps even utopian, since it dares give shape to what is still indeterminate, unseen, absent, or repressed. This prescient work gives one possible physical iteration of the site, which is, after all, a discursive formation comprising state regulations, economics and politics, shared cultural and social practices, and private rituals. The boundaries of a site are in fact determined jointly by these components, although it is not unusual that "a site is defined by those holding the power to do so."⁵

In the last year together with four architectural students from the National University of Singapore, I had the opportunity to test this rich concept of site by focusing on its potential as a process-based construction while drawing on our training in architecture and shared interest in publicly staged site-specific art.⁶ The brief was to manifest a specific material iteration of a site, which would be independently determined by the students' interest, experience and individual backgrounds. This requirement seemed innocuous enough to the seasoned architectural student. However, given the demands of a publicly sited work, the iteration needed to address not only the individual's observations and relationship to the studied site but also the site's possible spectators and publics. In this case, site was recontextualised as a relational, if not deeply entangled element in the trilateral equation "Site, Situation, Spectator,"⁷ which may yet still appear prosaic.

In her curatorial note to the exhibition catalogue, NUS Museum curator Noorashikin Zulkifli points precisely to the difficulties of "engaging" with site given the problematics of audience and situation:

"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 behaviour at different moments. Therefore, what actual relationships between site, situation and spectator could be investigated into and tested?"⁸

Zulkifli's critique reveals the blind spots encountered by site study exercises in the academic design studio. In the attempt to be inclusive, iterations of site are often overgeneralisations of an abstract or absent public. In developing the four projects, it became increasingly evident that the question of site was more complex than simply, for example, "engaging Kampong Glam" in the abstract. Rather, the notion of spectator could 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."⁹

The process of "conjuring" the spectator leads to two possible conclusions. One, that the iteration of site is a specific *performance* that draws on particular situations and publics, and thus, calibrates specific (rather than all-inclusive) positionings of both the maker (the student) and her imagined public. Two, the performative site unravels architectural authorship, since the boundaries between the architect (the student) and other actors in the production of the built environment (the spectator) are put into question. Here, rather than interrogate the architectural iteration as a bounded object, it becomes necessary to interpret architecture as a field, construed through intention, design, situation and spectator.¹⁰

On one level, the projects attempted to precipitate the students' interpretations of their chosen sites – a semi-derelict Muslim burial ground in Kampong Glam, a gleaming all-white new canteen on the university campus, the enshrined Southeast Asian art gallery at the University's Museum, and an initial choice of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) centre. On another level however, each project produced its own micro sites by plotting new routes, imagined temporalities, lost objects and mythical histories. Ultimately, as Lucy Lippard reminds us, site is elusive, non-static, and "conspire[s] to illusion." What is key is to recognise our own complicity in this performative process, for "We choose the lenses and then the frames." ■

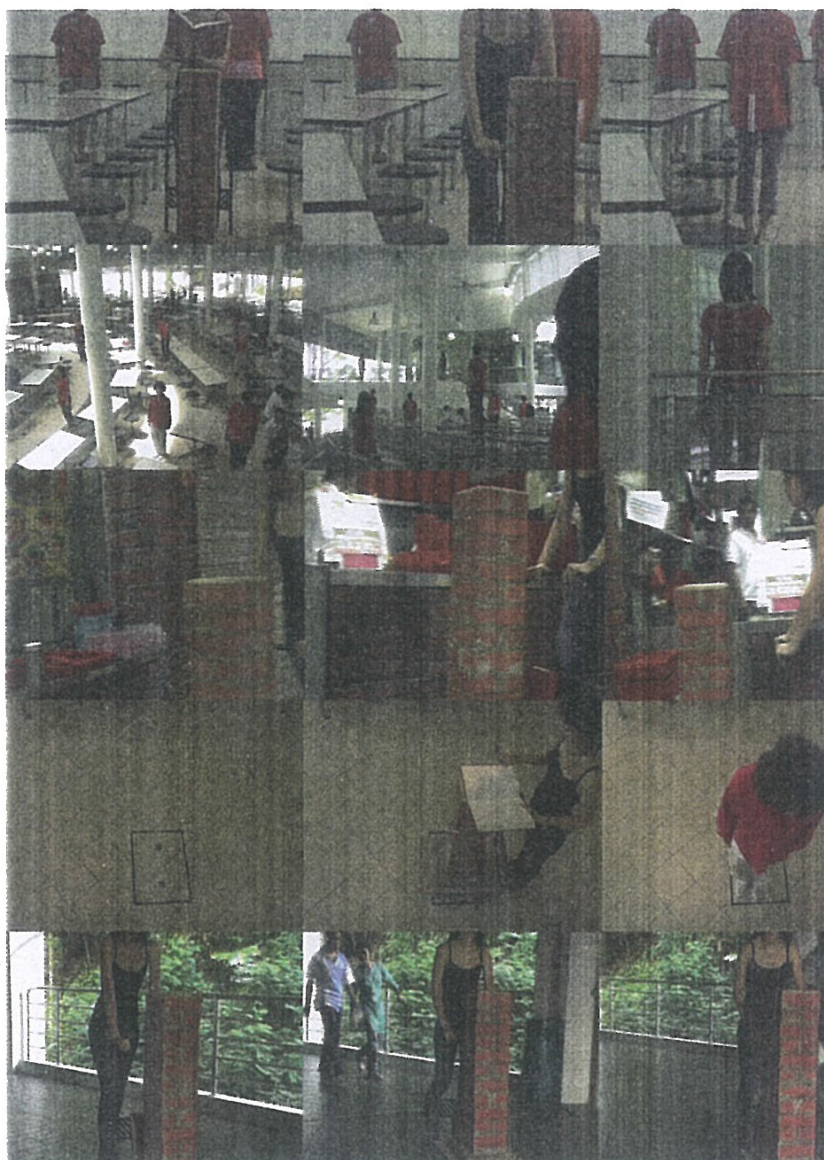
Canteen Brick-Down (2008)

BY DEBBIE LOO

IMAGES COURTESY OF DEBBIE LOO IN
COLLABORATION WITH 5FT CREATIVES

This project critiques the condition of *tabula rasa* that accompanies the urgency of accelerated redevelopment. It explores this condition by looking at the site of the old Arts canteen, formerly a red brick structure that was the favourite haunt of many university staff and students. Recently, the old canteen was swapped for a new white one. The project uses the moving image to superimpose two spatial and temporal registers, mapping the lost red-brick space over the new white architecture. The film captures the quasi-comical movement of a red-brick column that is wheeled on a trolley to various positions in the new canteen. These positions mark the spots where the old red-brick columns once stood. Throughout the film, the moving column continues on a seemingly unceasing quest to re-locate itself.

As a form of real-time mapping, the wheeled column is not just a signifier of what is lost. It precipitates the collision of two very different, yet overlapping temporalities – the *now* (the frantic rush of canteen-goers) and the *before* (captured by the leisurely movement of the trolley to each previous red-brick coordinate) – that are always condensed into an architectural space but are difficult to materialise through conventional drawings. In the film, as the moving red-brick column travels within the space of the new canteen and as each previous coordinate is marked out, “live” elements (or “red shirts”) stand in to mark these points of loss. The juxtaposition of real-time activities of the canteen-goers against the static red “human columns” is disjunctive, and this also disrupts the all-white architecture.



My Architectural Travel Map (2008)

BY JULIANA CHAN

IMAGE COURTESY OF JULIANA CHAN

This project explores the power of graphical representation in ordering our spatial imagination.

A map is never a neutral representation. It is ideological, territorial and exclusive. Drawing on mapping convention, an imaginary map of sites related to the architectural student's professional and private life is collaged out of different maps, carefully pieced together so that they appear, at first glance, to be seamless. Roads in Singapore connected to those in Paris and London serve as indices tracing the actual experiences and projective desires of the mapmaker. There are elements that are emphasised as much as there are entities that are excluded.

An initial idea was to site the map in the URA Centre. The map hangs temporarily at the NUS Museum awaiting more suitable premises.



Jalan Kubor (2008)

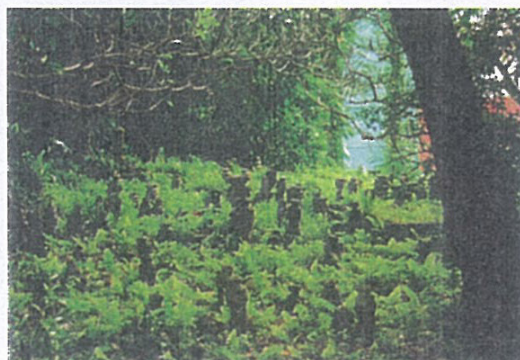
BY HANAN ALSAGOFF

TEXT AND IMAGES COURTESY OF HANAN ALSAGOFF

"Jalan Kubor" translates directly from Malay into "Cemetery Street," and is the name of 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, the cemetery is suspected to have been used, prior to this period and the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles, as a burial ground for past members of the Royal family. In 1827, North Bridge Road was built, separating the Sultan's Palace from the burial ground. Ownership of this cemetery is ambiguous, with claims that a renowned Arab businessman, Syed Sharif Omar bin Ali Aljunied, had donated the land in Victoria Street for a Muslim cemetery to function as a *wakaf* burial land. Traditionally in Muslim law, land that is designated as *wakaf* land is to function as such until Judgment Day, unless it is transferred by an authorised party. According to the URA Masterplan of 2003, the burial land is slated for redevelopment into a residential area.

The cemetery currently houses the tombs of Singapore's Royal family and other prominent members of Singapore's early Muslim community, with at least 100 over celebrated tombs that are covered with cloth and often put onto a raised plinth. Tombs like these are habitually known to be sites of *ziyara* (visitation) throughout Southeast Asia, which is a well-established practice in the Malay Archipelago. There is evidence of offerings left on the graves and the glorification and adornment of those tombs widely perceived within the Malay community as a *keramat* (holy shrine). The topic of *keramat* worship or the veneration of saints is a sensitive issue within the region – whether or not it is acceptable in Islam is highly debatable.

The installation consists of 20 viewing boxes containing images of details from the cemetery. These boxes are placed in a trail, starting from the heart of Kampong Glam in Bussorah Street, through the Malay Heritage Centre and finally terminating at Jalan Kubor, linking all the major sites in Kampong Glam associated with those buried in the cemetery. Each box is accompanied by a short text related to knowledge of the cemetery, its tombs and the area's history as well as future plans for development. The viewing box, consisting of a peephole on one end and a photograph printed on tracing paper at the other end, is tilted slightly upwards to enable light to filter directly through the photograph, accentuating its highlights.





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Bali Revisited (2008)

BY JAN LIM

TEXT AND IMAGES COURTESY OF JAN LIM

At the confluence of material and museum culture lies the creation of a myth.

The Bali trip of 1952 that was taken by four pioneer artists – namely Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng – can be said to be one such myth, popularised through numerous accounts in local art history. Today, the trip is often credited with having incubated the “Nanyang” artistic identity in its incipient stages, almost to the point of glorification. It is, therefore, time to revisit Bali.

Through a collection of artefacts, I hope to address the complex trilateral relationships between material, museum and myth in the Bali field trip, and to provoke a re-encountering of the art while unsettling parts of our artistic consciousness. Ultimately, this installation is as much a commentary on museum-goers themselves as it is on the artists concerned, in the parallels between the viewer’s objectification and concomitant mystification of the artist, and the artist’s subject matter. The institution of the museum, in mediating between the spectator and the subject, perpetuates the myth.

The artefacts question our reliance on institutional authority by embellishing fact with fiction, history with myth. It is up to you to decide which is which.

1. Lucy R. Lippard, “Around the Corner: A Photo Essay,” in *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies*, ed. Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.
2. Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn, “Why Site Matters,” in Burns and Kahn, xii.
3. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 4.
4. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 26.
5. Burns and Kahn, “Why Site Matters,” x.
6. The students were also part of the University Scholars Programme, an academic scheme that enables students enrolled in the programme to pursue a research topic of interest outside of their normal curriculum base in their senior years of study.
7. See *Site, Situation, Spectator*, exhibition catalogue based on four site-specific works (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008). The exhibition was staged by students from the Department of Architecture who were also part of the University Scholars Programme. The exhibition, which was distributed at various sites in the city, and ran from 7th March to 7th May 2008. The project benefited from critical input by curators at the NUS Museum who sharpened its conceptual grounding and provided curatorial aesthetics through open dialogue, site visits and interim critiques. The team from NUS Museum includes Ahmad Mashadi, Noorashikin Zulkifli, Lim Qinyi and Wang Zineng.
8. Noorashikin Zulkifli, “Curatorial Notes,” in *Site, Situation, Spectator*.
9. Zulkifli, “Curatorial Notes.”
10. See Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes (ed.), “Foreword,” in *Architecture and Authorship* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 10.