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The Lands of Singapore

With reference to Taussig's, Dripps' and Solnit's texts as well as other relevant external resources, give at least two specific examples of landscapes unique to land-scarce Singapore. With Singapore often referred to as a red dot, a description which highlights its condition of land scarcity, how has the commodification of ground been manifested in the island's urban vision?

The notion of land scarcity in Singapore could not have been anything more than a politically and economically induced condition, a permanent, and inevitable one - from post-terra nullius to tabula rasa till today. The condition could be surmised in the Habibie's 'little red dot' incident¹. From which the little red dot has entered the psyche of every Singaporean¹ and now referred to with pride in the branding of our success story. One of the unquestioned, inherent conditions we have been made to prescribe to, among others like "lack of natural resources", "falling birth-rate", it has shaped nation building in a pragmatic way, rigid and versed in problem solving within these assumed contexts.

In light of our smallness, commodification of land has thus been a pre-condition of every concept plan laid out for the city-state. The strategies to ensure its economical and political survival have always been targeted at growth, physically and financially. Land reclamation was not a phenomenon from post-independent Singapore. Under colonial rule where Singapore was a bustling port, such practice was already in place to ensure sufficient capacity for continual increase in trade. Earth from Mount Wallich and Mount Palmer was used to form the Telok Ayer Basin in 1879, as part of expansion works on the docks that were spurred by the opening of Suez canal in 1869. ² Then on, the topography of the island began to take on its flatness we know of today, as mountains are leveled to gain usable land area. It is this lack of notion of ground and impermanence of the landscape from which Singapore was constructed, since the beginning of its days. Here in Singapore, even burial

¹ Wikipedia, 'Little Red Dot', 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_red_dot>

² NLB Infopedia, 'Cecil Street', 31 Jan 2009 <http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1435_2009-12-10.html>

grounds are not spared in the land grab for development,³ except, maybe where the most sacred lay.

The need for commodification of land is simultaneously real and make-believe – real in the present situation, but fictitious in the future as we continue to blindly believe that the only test-and-tried method is the only formula that works in assessing the issue of land scarcity. Currently, there seem to be no other way of regulating our demands of land besides pegging it to the dollar sign. In reference to Dripp's writing, the rationalization of ground into land is the antithesis to the valuation of ground,⁴ which induces the very condition of land scarcity. Land has become a resource that the market taps on to grow, the smallness of which limits its growth in value and capacity.

So, what is the context of landscape in Singapore? The mission statement of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is to 'plan and facilitate the physical development of Singapore into a Tropical City of Excellence'⁵ the landscape here is decidedly tropical and urban, of which the only thing left that is authentically tropical is its climate⁶. The vision of 'an island with a increased sense of island-ness'... a city that embraces its coastline more closely as a signal of its island heritage'⁵ demonstrates that our landscape is used as a political and economical tool to be manipulated in the fight for power.

The contest for land has evolved, as landscape 'is becoming the new ideological medium, more popular... easier to implement than architecture... two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional, more economical, accommodating... more susceptible to intentional inscription'⁷. From a naturalist point of view, this prevalence of the sculptured green is all but

³ Many cemeteries that sprawled across the island in the 1960s were cleared to give way to HDB estates and development, eg, Queenstown, Bishan and even Ngee Ann City. Most recently, the largest Chinese cemetery at Bukit Brown has been contested for a housing redevelopment project by URA.

The Straits Time, An Uphill Struggle Saving Bt Brown, 19 Jun 2011, <<http://blog.nus.edu.sg/fassnews/files/2011/06/An-uphill-struggle-saving-Bt-Brown.pdf>>

⁴ Cripps, Robin. *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies*, London Routledge, p59-91 (2005)

⁵ Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991, *Living the Next Lap*, p10

⁶ Koolhaas, Rem. *Singapore Songline: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa*, in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *SMLXL*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005

⁵ Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991, *Living the Next Lap*, p10

⁷ Koolhaas, Rem. *Singapore Songline: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa*, in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *SMLXL*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005

the manifestation of commodification of ground in the urban vision of a tropical city of excellence. It is all about assigning a monetary value to nature to help justify its existence in land-scarce Singapore.

Every parcel of land in Singapore illustrates the dire state of the commodified ground; in this essay we explore three unique landscapes and condition of the commodified ground: the real, the hyper-real and the contested. The first landscape to be discussed is the Jurong Islands and Jurong Rock Caverns, where commodification of ground in most honest of expression, the reality of the mechanics that drives our 'urban vision'. In the second example, the development of Marina Bay is no less honest in its quest to conquer in its mission statement. The execution of which lures us into a hyper-reality of a Third Nature⁸, where nature is resurrected and the commodification of ground seems most alluring and justifiable in line with the urban vision. The last and most unique landscape to Singapore is the Rail Corridor, a newly acquired, highly contested strip of land on our own ground, at a re-evaluative crossroad of our time, culminating in all pasts, present and futures of the island.

Jurong Island is an artificial island off Jurong Industrial Estate, the result of the amalgamation of several offshore islands through land reclamation⁹. It was conceived out of land scarcity and demand for industrial land in the 1980s, effectively making it the prime example of land, commodified. Yet its physical manifestation is not reflected in our island's urban vision. In fact it could well be the antithesis of it. Like the ugly child that the parents are not too keen to showcase to the world, its physical presence is well repressed, in preserving its image as a leader in sustainable developments. It silently sustains the growth of lavish waterfront development. The public has seen little of Jurong Island, no less set foot on it without valid pass. Home to major weights in the petrochemical industry, it is heavily secured (perhaps to

⁸ First nature refers to direct relationship between landscape and human, where both is interdependent on each other, second nature refers to interference of capitalization of landscape and social construction of nature, where human view landscape as something they could use to give them monetary benefits, the third nature is where landscape has been totally changed and reinvented such that no traces of original could be seen. Routledge, Noel Castree, *Nature*. 2005

⁹ Wikipedia, *Jurong Island*, 3 Oct 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurong_Island>

repress the industrial image of Singapore as well?), yet amidst the general elusiveness of the island we know for sure its true nature, even if it was artificial, its purpose was clear – that is to support industrialization in Singapore.

While it is indisputable that the island is created out of economic grounds, its implications on value of land and ground extends beyond its current boundary of 32 km²⁸. Where did all the sand that became land come from? Singapore's growing coastline had been blamed for the disappearance of tiny Indonesian islands, which have since banned sand exports to Singapore.¹¹ There are even reports that accuse Singapore of acquiring illegal sand imports from dredging Cambodian rivers.¹²¹³ The environmental degradation caused by our hunger perhaps explains why Singapore is reluctant to reveal its sources, with the damaging

¹⁰ Jurong Island forms a land area of about 32km² from an initial area of less than 10km².
Wikipedia, Jurong Island, 3 Oct 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurong_Island>

¹¹ Arnold, Wayne, '*Neighbour Leaves Singapore Short of Sand*', New York Times, 16 March 2001
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/16/world/asia/16singapore.html>> Accessed on 3 Oct 2011

¹² Pruned, '*Mapping the dark geography of Sand*', 19 Sept 2011 <<http://pruned.blogspot.com/2011/09/mapping-dark-geography-of-sand.html>>

¹³ Gray, Denis, Associated Press, '*Sand For Sand: Environment ravaged*',
<http://throughthesandglass.typepad.com/through_the_sandglass/2011/09/where-does-singapore-come-from.html> 1 September 2011

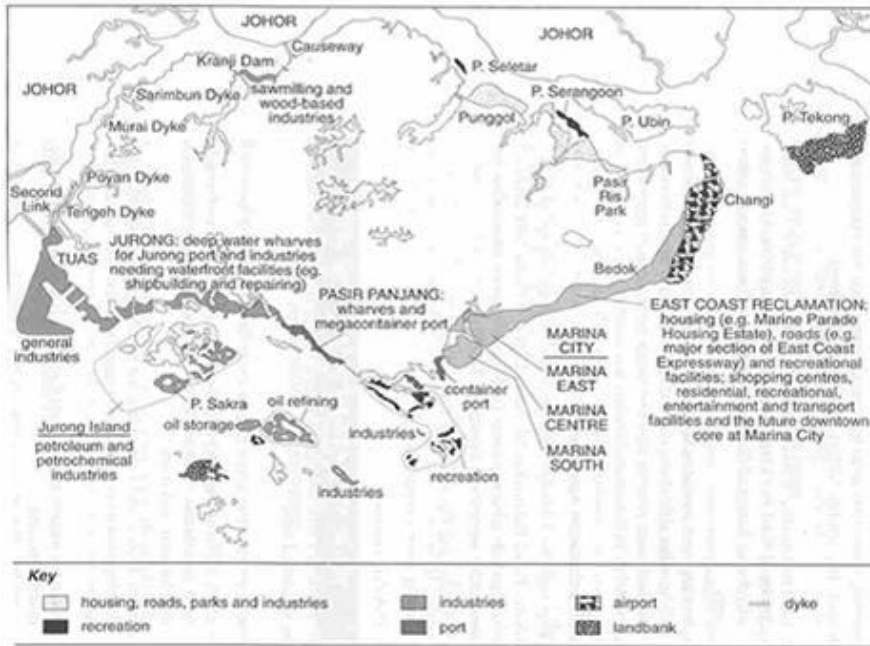


Fig. 5.41 Singapore: Reclaimed land and uses



Fig 1. Singapore: Reclaimed Land and Uses

Fig 2. Land reclamation on Jurong Island

prospect of seemingly exploiting its economically weaker neighbour and losing credibility as a leader in sustainable development. It is a highly tactical game that leaders have play in reclaiming their way to the ideal urban vision for the city-state without leaving a messy trail of dirty evidence. Dubious as origin of sand is, the constructed land we called ours must therefore be questioned. For to foolishly embrace such land of artificial construct and displaced soul would be a fallacy and dishonour to the nature of ground and all the things it stood for.

As if an entire artificial island devoted to petrochemical industry is not already a sign of most pragmatic and uptight planning of land-use, another peculiar artificial landform lies beneath Jurong Island. The on-going construction of the Jurong Rock Caverns, will see the first underground oil storage facility to be built in South-east Asia under taken by the government industrial developmental arm, Jurong Town Council (JTC). To most Singaporean, it is a non-issue – out of sight, out of mind. They will never get to witness this impressive subterranean structure anyway. Beyond the cavernous form alien to our monotonous terrain, its aim is simple and direct - to give Singapore a competitive advantage to attract more investors. The economic rationale of building deep into the ground is that it will free up about 60ha of usable land above ground, which is highly sought after by investors on Jurong Island,¹⁴ which can then be used for higher value-added manufacturing activities. Does alleviating land shortage justify blasting seabed at depths beyond 130m? With mountains flattened and seabed hollowed out, where and what will Singapore stand upon in the future? Will we start considering replicating mountains out of reclaimed immigrant soil, just like the Netherlands are speculating¹⁵? (Because the best of our government projects came loaded with international precedents anyway) By selling our ground to international forces of market, could it be akin to selling our soul to capitalism? Yet again, maybe it is a non-issue, since as citizens we cannot attest to the ground anyway, handicapped by our in-articulation.

The vision of Marina Bay surmised its purpose: 'Explore, exchange, entertain' (Marina Bay 2008). In essence, it is blatantly set as a playground for commodity fetishism. Land, if not landscape as a product, by the wills of social, political and economical orders have been conveniently placed into the system upon which the only values it inherits are the ones readable to a bar-code reader. Heritage, nature, memories, unless pegged to a dollar sign is of absolute disinterest to the capitalist society. In witness to land enslaved to the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, we observe many a starchitect submit 'iconic' designs

¹⁴ Cheam, Jessica, Straits Times, Jurong Rock Cavern ready by 2013, 17 Apr 2009, <http://wildsingaporenews.blogspot.com/2009/04/jurong-rock-cavern-ready-by-2013.html>

¹⁵ Pruned, Mountain for Netherlands. <http://pruned.blogspot.com/2011/09/mountain-for-netherlands.html>> Accessed 3 Oct 2011

proposals for the prestigious Marina Bay Sands Resort, all in a drunken, glitz-induced stupor, vying to be built. Drawing on Taussig's idea that 'the beach is the ultimate fantasy space where nature and carnival blend in prehistory in the dialectic image of modernity'¹⁶, the unfolding spectacle of a massive bayfront development we observe is not one that is entirely new. It may well be another cycle of waterfront development that happened 100 years ago, albeit on a different scale, in a different style that the old cannot identify. This strategic manipulation of landscape and environment, the commodification of which, is justified by the need to attract "foreign talent" to bolster our economy, much like how immigrants were attracted to the shores of Singapore and its flourishing trading ports. Unlike yesteryears, however, these talents are a lot harder to please. The objective is to foster an 'appealing, varied and stimulated environment in which they would love and work in'¹⁷, a further justification of all the waterfront housing development, entertainment hub and financial centers – to ensure our continual economic edge and hence survival in the global market, we must stop short of nothing to draw the most talented ones from competition elsewhere. The blatant showcase of the political ideology of creating the perfect image of the country to sell to foreign talent reflects Solnit's statement that 'every landscape is a landscape of desire'¹⁸. Sitting on prime estate –in all sense, *land* for it is reclaimed and held no previous associations with ground – it completes the postcard *image* that where recreation, 'nature' stands aside the CBD. This total landscape/skyline is quite unlike that in New York or Hongkong, as the large expanse of land set aside for green is peculiar where plot ratio is traditionally highest. The whole commodification of ground and green (Gardens by the Bay, Marina Barrage, Marina Vista) completes the narrative the island's urban vision. And its relatively low plot ratio is justifiably so, as the aim is to make recreational actively generate profit for the economy. Socio-spatial practices in the commodification of ground have changed over the years, now taking a developmentalist stance with a nuance for quality life.

¹⁶ Taussig, Michael. *The Beach (A Fantasy)*, 2002

¹⁷ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Living the Next Lap*, 1991. p.18

¹⁸ Rebecca Solnit, "*Prison and Paradises*", in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscape for Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp1-11.

In this hyper-realist scenario of the commodification of ground, one could easily be bought over by logical sounding reasoning, picturesque developments. Whereas in reality, all that we inherit or experimented with could at best, be worth nothing in years to come, at worst, turn out to be a crazed Frankenstein-construct of Nature in a 'Potemkin Metropolitan'.

The story of greening development to signify a certain coming of age, reflecting higher aims of qualitative growth than quantitative is a global phenomenon. Taking away from the sea to recreate a new environment of iconoclastic buildings and then recreating nature as a commodity that drives economic growth.

The 26km long former KTM railway land is now a highly contested ground where many hands are vying to stick into the pot of honey, each with their own vested interest, or vision for this unique landscape. Here, we are talking of evading the inevitable commodification of ground in a new urban vision, after the beaches and vistas, an alternative typology to read Singapore.

The difficulty of naming this land itself lends to prove that complex issues of political sensitivity, economics, history and social change surmount this land. Oft-cited precedents for conservation such as the Highline, can only highlight the fundamental difference and uniqueness of this landscape downright to its intricacies. The Highline, a 1.6km elevated park on a former railroad coursing through an urban-scape, was the preservation effort of a group of lobbyist who called themselves 'Friends of Highline'. The group had only managed to argued successfully for the preservation by backing with statistics that the High Line is economically rational, and that new tax revenues created by new public space will outweigh the costs of construction¹⁹.

Preservation here however, cannot only be content with battling greedy developers and planners, for the context of which, it is not something that can be resolved by mere commodification of ground. Whether the line, itself once serving the culture of commodity

¹⁹ The High Line, "*The Highline History*", <<http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history>> Accessed 20 Sept 2011.

fetishism ferrying goods in and out of Singapore, will return to its serve the capitalist system or remain off the charts as a evolved, untamed landform, is a test of the value people place on ground today, this time not just the elite and the planners. This time, perhaps in context of the recent General Elections²⁰, the people have redeemed for themselves a voice in the land, and in that redemption sought to challenge the commodification of ground in line with political-economic agendas of the government. To community-based interest groups, this opportunity to participate in shaping our physical environment is symbolic in the reclaiming a lost psychological space by current and future generation of Singaporeans. A space that augments intergenerational, inter community bonding to rekindle emotional ties to Singapore, in the process of which, a revaluation, and making of 'new' ground. Post-independent Singapore was built on the keen foresights of a people sharing a common vision and responsiveness to an ever-changing global milieu. Similarly, standing at the current crossroads of a world flattened by globalization and information technologies, it is imperative that a fresh social compact be forged to keep this country ahead in a highly competitive environment²¹. To achieve such a national objective, a new space lying conveniently and strategically from North through South of the island is what is needed to engender the emergence of this new social compact between state and citizen.

Stakeholders and ground-up initiatives such as community-based interest group the Green Corridor found suddenly found themselves on the same talking table as URA, MND and other developmental honchos. Though the attitudes of such groups hardly reflects that of 'do-or-die' environmentalist in the west, and to a certain degree have already seemed to resigned to fate that commodification of the ground is inevitable, for the ministries to included their voice signals perhaps, we are ready to explore other ways of valuing our ground, not merely as land. The quizzical trading of four land parcels in prime real estate land (Marina

²⁰ The election was described as a "watershed election" in various forms by various parties. The final results saw a 6.46% swing against the PAP from the 2006 elections to 60.14%, its lowest since independence. The Workers' Party ended up with six seats in Parliament, the best opposition parliamentary result since independence. Wikipedia, *Singapore General Elections 2011*, < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singaporean_general_election,_2011> Accessed 20 Sep 2011

²¹ John Chye, Fung. Opening Narrative " Re-imagining the Green Corridor" Exhibition. Accessed 4 Oct 2011

South, Ophir-Rochor) in exchange for three land parcels along the line(The Green Corridor 2011), though also meant that this piece of land is largely valuable in other intrinsic aspects more than its real estate value. Whether or not the line will be preserved or completely erased to remove unpleasant memories of our ties to Malaysia and put Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew's mind at ease is another completely different political game altogether, much like how Solnit proposed that even natural landscapes are marked and scarred by invisible political boundaries²². It is an exasperating struggle to convince if not understand why authorities on board are so hard-on in their stanch to increase public housing when it is not so much the local population that is on the rise, but that of foreigners.

The idea is to show that 'ground' can be awakened to acquire new meaning besides 'land' that it has long stood for, as long as the community actively participates in this new creation of having a stake in the ground, beyond mere economic ownership, perhaps something more universal and profound like our moral obligation as earthlings will drive us to preserve our ground for all that it holds in time and space, and into the making of new grounds. Sadly, even in the public's revaluation of ground in terms of nature, heritage and public spaces, it seems like one can only speak loudest against authority in monetary terms. Ultimately, till the demise of the ideology of the capitalist state, there cannot exist comfortable negotiation for ground in any language besides money. Money can paint land into exciting, colourful and glitzy landscapes holding promises that even collective forces of history and nature cannot revive in the ground, this much also holds true before the next bubble burst in the market.

²² Rebecca Solnit, "*Prison and Paradises*", in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscape for Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp1-11.



Fig 3. Panel at Re-imagining the Green Corridor Exhibition, 2011

Landscape and commodity fetishism in Singapore is always a game of taking one step forward and two steps back. This game of tango is certainly most enticing to myopic developers whose desires and intentions are caught in the wills and whims of the invisible market forces. Nature has always been forced to take a backseat, even as landscape takes on new forms and meanings in the current social-economic and political-scape, that is vastly different from what it was just 30 years ago. But nonetheless, we have yet to find a way out of commodifying ground in face of permanent land scarcity (ironically, as we are expanding our shorelines more than ever before). Nature, heritage and culture can only measure against economic value to be understood and included in our urban vision.

Commodification of ground is now harder to trace in the obvious, to the everyday man, more parks, and manicured landscape is a welcome relief from the urban-scape. Places of recreation and leisure have been commodified but its nature not made known to public until they are forced to pay a \$20 entrance fee, car park fee, meals etc. These are all but in line

with our urban vision, which is a realization of market demands of our time. In our land-scarce island, the wilderness will remain censored, while the tropical imageability is sold to the world, dealt like a skeleton in the closet that can't be removed, obliged to keep until we find a new way to exploit it, perhaps when we start forming a new urban vision after the waterfront, the possibility of a green corridor. Hopefully, in a truly *tropical* manner.

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Image reference

Fig. 1 <http://library.thinkquest.org/C006891/reclaimland.jpg>

Fig. 2 http://throughthesandglass.typepad.com/through_the_sandglass/2011/09/where-does-singapore-come-from.html

Fig. 3
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.199969746738388.44903.104275799641117&type=1>