

ARCHITECTURE AND THE BODY  
PERPETUATING  
MEMORIES

WRITTEN BY

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## Architecture and the Body - Perpetuating Memories

### Gateway into History or perhaps not.



Image 1

All that remains of the old National Library are two entrance pillars facing Stamford Road. One cannot help but notice their silent and rather eerie solitude, misplaced at the foot of Fort Canning Hill. Perhaps a last hasty attempt to leave something behind as memory, the pillars are nothing more than a remnant, their dignity assaulted by a stop-sign haphazardly attached to each of them. In its hey-day, they were a gateway into a free public library, a space once heralded by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew during its grand opening as a "milestone in our rising standards of life."<sup>1</sup> At the end of its lifespan by 2004, deemed as "not of great architectural merit and should not be conserved," it was deleted to make way for the Fort Canning Tunnel.<sup>2</sup> Today, the entrance pillars stand guard as a gateway, not into the functional democratic space of before but into a non-functional emptiness, into anti-space.

### Physicality of Space and Memory

It is apparent that the library at Stamford possessed sentimental memories of place in the people's minds and heart, made evident by the fervent public debate over its demolition. But as a visitor standing in front of these remaining entrance pillars, the memories and sentiments of the library summarised in short newspaper clippings and letter entries seem to stop right there before their traffic signs. The entrance gates are insubstantial and resist the reconstruction of these memories.

The three-dimensional physicality of the library building itself - its enclosure, provides tactile and sensory experiences for the body which in turn associates them with other personal

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<sup>1</sup> Seet K.K., "Chapter Thirteen A Place for the People" In *A Place for the People*, Seet K.K. (Singapore: Times Books International, 1983), 138.

<sup>2</sup> M. Nirmla, "National Library to go" *The Straits Times*, (14 March 1999).

memories. Three-dimensional space becomes a canvas on which to construct memories. Bloomer remarks how "Every real place can be remembered [...] because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds."<sup>3</sup> Repeated tactile and sensory experience with the same space, i.e. "rituals over time leave their impression on the walls and forms of the interior and endow the rooms with artefacts which give us access to previous experiences."<sup>4</sup> As such, the physicality of space itself, through repeated experiences, can become essential to the body's ability to recall memories. Consequently, the removal of the three-dimensional architectural enclosure seriously incapacitates a body's ability to construct and recall memories.

This essay explores how 3 different bodily experiences within a shared three-dimensional space of the old national library construct memories for each individual body. It scrutinises these body-space transactions to understand more comprehensively the inseparable and irrevocable link between three-dimensional physicality of space and memories.

### **From Outside to Inside – Sensory Details and Associated Memories**

*"The staircase with its shallow steps, now retiled still led upstairs from the porch. The burgundy floral motif still lay on the floor in the lobby. The toilets still had those old-fashioned push-out windows. The place even smelled the same. But some things do change. Things do move on. The library will, for one... Dad has moved on too. He died in September 2003. Just as the library is moving on to a better place, I believe dad has done the same."*<sup>5</sup>

~ Chiang Yin Pheng, Journalist

*"This drive to externalise memory and to make the past available to the present has resulted in architectural works that record and transmit something fleeting - ideas, events, emotions that would otherwise dissipate and vaporise into thin air... Architecture preserves and enhances memory by recasting it in more permanent materials... Moreover, architecture serves memory not because it contains memories, but because it insists that we remember."*<sup>6</sup>

~ Tan Hock Beng, Principal of Maps Design Studio and architecture critic

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<sup>3</sup> Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, "Human Identity in Memorable Places" In *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 107.

<sup>4</sup> Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, "Body, Memory, and Community" In *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Chiang Yin Pheng, "Dad's undying gift" In *Moments in Time: memories of the national library*, National Library Board. (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore, 2004), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Tan Hock Beng, "Reconstructing Memories" In *Memories and the National Library: between forgetting and remembering*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 67-71.

The three dimensional physicality of space and its inherent sensory variation (e.g. changes in material, sound, depth, ambience etc.) provides the ‘queue cards’ necessary for the body to “reconstruct and locate events of the past within particular spaces within particular time, within particular ambience.”<sup>7</sup>



Image II: Staircase leading to the main entrance of the National Library at Stamford Road.

As Chiang transits through the library as a child, it’s tactile, visual, audio and other sensory variation engages his senses. From the porch, Chiang had to ascend a flight of shallow steps, transiting into the foyer where his eyes strays unto the burgundy flora motifs in the middle of the floor and into the heart of the interior that is the book stacks where the stagnant smell of books confronts his sense of smell. The progression from outside to inside becomes a transitional ritual for his senses; the three-dimensional architecture of the library becomes a physical map of sensory experience for his body.

This ritual of sensory experiences, through repeated rehearsal and meaningful association, are consolidated into long-term memories. (Luke Mastin, 2010)<sup>8</sup> As Chiang visits the library with his father every weekend, these repeated sensory experiences become subconscious – his senses registers them but thinks little of them. However, when he revisits the library as an adult, just days before its demolition, he partakes in this ritual once again, his moving body rehearses his recollected sensory engagement with those spaces. His present ritual draws on previous similar rehearsals, providing Chiang’s body with the ‘queue cards’ which allows his mind to recall his past experience of the same space and also his memory of sharing this space with his father. Casey explain the interdependence between memory and bodily movement, “In such memories, the past is embodied in actions. [...] it is actively an ingredient in the very bodily movements that accomplish a particular action.” (Casey p149)<sup>9</sup> The experiences of the stairs, motif and smell become sensory details - physical details of

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<sup>7</sup> Tan Hock Beng, "Reconstructing Memories" In *Memories and the National Library: between forgetting and remembering*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 67-71.

<sup>8</sup> "Sensory Memory," last modified 2010, [http://www.human-memory.net/types\\_sensory.html](http://www.human-memory.net/types_sensory.html)

<sup>9</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Images of Action" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 63.

architecture that the body interacts with that become essential when recalling memories within a specific time, place or ambience.

Three-dimensional space becomes synonymous with emotional memory because the interaction between the body and sensory details present in the space insists that we remember emotional memories associated with them. “Every real place can be remembered [...] because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the sensory details of the stairs, motif and smell not only allow Chiang to recollect the memories of his body within the space itself but to also associate them with the memory of his father. In this way, these details transcends its tangible architectural physicality into the intangible depth of human emotion and memory. It is this association that make these sensory details corporeal materialisations of memories. It hence becomes understandable when Chiang shares how the imminent passing of these details mirrors the passing of his father, how the passing of those physical details parallels the passing of their associated memories.

### Between the shelves – Memory of Reading

*“Each section breathed a distinct odour [...] The air around the philosophy shelves was more sombre, and the books wore a graver odour, a heavy woody whiff with an underlay of acidic tang.”*<sup>11</sup>

~ Boey Kim Cheng, *Writer-in-Residence, Nanyang Technological University*

*“Although we cannot see the inside of our body, we do develop memories of an inside world that include a panorama of experiences taken from the environment and etched in the “feeling” of our identity.”*<sup>12</sup>

~ Kent C. Bloomer, *Professor, Yale School of Architecture*

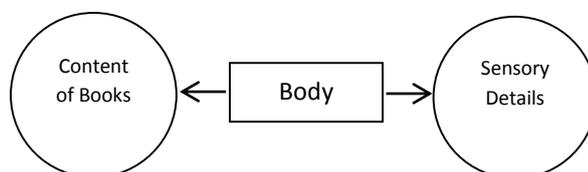


Fig 1. Relationship between Content of Books and Sensory Details through the Body as a medium

The memory of reading traditionally involves the body and the content of the book. Often seen as a solely introspective act, the memory of reading however also implicates the body's

<sup>10</sup> Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, "Body, Memory, and Community" In *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Boey Kim Cheng, "The Library of Memory," *biblioasia*, (April-June 2014): 06.

<sup>12</sup> Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, "Body, Memory, and Community" In *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 49.

experience of sensory details present in the space in which reading takes place. Often we see our bodies as closed separate entities within three-dimensional space but Franck proposes that the body is open, inclusive, and permeable, permitting a “degree of reciprocity between body and space.”<sup>13</sup>



Image III: Black and white photograph of the South East Asia Room's interior with its rows of shelves, at the National Library building at Stamford Road.

Cheng's 'open' body incorporates the sensory detail of 'odour' in the space between aisles of each section with the contents of the books, assimilating this detail as part of the experience of reading and thus the memory of reading itself. As his moving body perambulated between the aisles, his body senses the odours surrounding the philosophy books, describing the odour as "sombre" and "graver", as if the seriousness of these books have spilled out into the air and into his body when he breathes. Cheng associates the "heavy woody whiff" with the "dark oppressive weight" he feels when he reads these books. In his words, "The memory of reading has become indivisibly entwined with the memories of those navigating the aisles" and the smell he inhales.<sup>14</sup>

The memory of reading involves the bodily "experiences taken from the environment" of the library as much as the reading experience of the book itself purely because of the body's "constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the Self from its spatial and situational existence."<sup>15</sup> As such, consciously or subconsciously, the body is reading the space as much as it is reading the book.

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<sup>13</sup> Karen A. Franck and R. Bianca Lepori, "From the Body" In *Architecture from the Inside Out: From the Body, the Senses, the Site and the Community*. (Chichester: Wiley, 2007), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Boey Kim Cheng, "The Library of Memory," *biblioasia*, (April-June 2014): 05.

<sup>15</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Bodily Identification" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 64.

## Journey through Rooms: Superimposed and Projected Memories

"My bond with the National Library at Stamford Road remained strong from the time I took my first steps into the Children's Section as a child... I am now a mother of three children... Whenever I saw them reading at the library, it evoked memories of my childhood days." <sup>16</sup>

~ Judy Ng, Deputy Director

"Perception, memory and imagination are in constant interaction [...] Literature and cinema would be devoid of their power of enchantment without our capacity to enter a remembered or imagined place." <sup>17</sup>

~ Juhani Pallasmaa, Author of *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*

The interactions of one or more bodies with a physical space allows the space to become the canvas upon which their memories can be superimposed, creating one continuous interplay of perception in the eyes of the present party, imagining the memory of the party in the past using the same space. Pallasmaa articulates it most precisely when she parallels a door handle as a handshake of the building, "The tactile sense connects us with time and tradition: through impressions of touch we shake the hands of countless generations."<sup>18</sup>

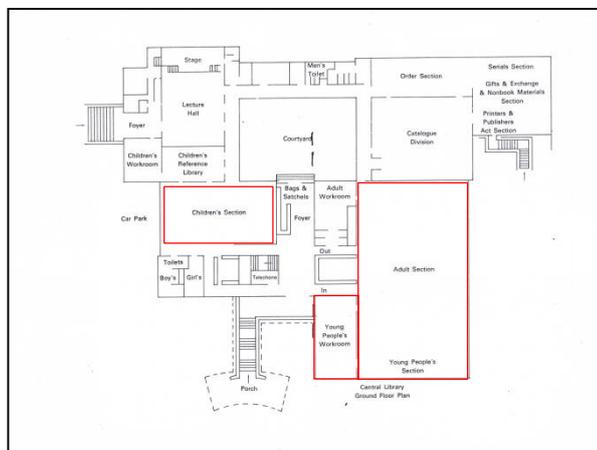


Image IV

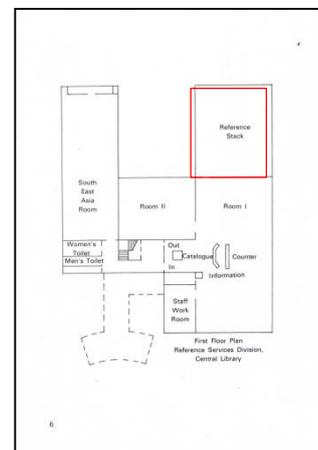


Image V

Ng spent much of her life in the Old National Library and as she matured, the library and its contained material grew with her as she progressed from one room to another, from one

<sup>16</sup> Judy Ng, "The bond stays" In *Moments in Time: memories of the national library*, National Library Board. (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore, 2004), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Spaces of Memory and Imagination" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 67-68.

<sup>18</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Shape of Touch" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 56.

material to the next. As a child, the children section supplied her imagination with a "myriad of fairytale books", as an adolescent, the library became a place for "leisure reading and academic assignments" and finally during her career as a librarian, she worked at the Reference Services Division searching through "reels of microfilms".

This dialogue between spaces and growth transcend her mortality when she brings her children to the same library which accommodated her. Her body encounters the familiar space while her eyes captures her children being present between the same shelves, between the same walls as she did when she was a child. This image is potent, Ng interacts with the image of the space and her children with her eyes. Vision is an extension of the sense of touch, <sup>19</sup>the gaze implies an unconscious touch.<sup>20</sup> Her visual interaction of this situational similarity allows her to "[project] fragments of the self on to the other person"<sup>21</sup> – her children; Melanie Klein's concept of 'projective identification' suggest Ng lends part of herself – her childhood memory, to the space. In that way, she conjures up the memory of being in the children section herself and in doing so projects her progression through the library spaces while growing up unto her children too.

Ng interaction with the space goes beyond her vision or the other 4 senses. Her interaction also involves the projection of her memory onto the space. Using the space as a common 'canvas', Ng superimposes her memory onto her children', fusing her past experience with her children's present experience thus creating a single continuous memory. As such, our body's projection of Self unto space give space its ability to relate between people and between generations.

### **Memory and Three-Dimensional Space**

In 2005, the new National Library building at Victoria Street opened to unveil a brick wall in its basement's bamboo sculpture garden, constructed using 5000 red bricks salvaged from its former structure.<sup>22</sup> The reconstruction, reminiscent of the library's bamboo courtyard setting at Stamford Road, was "built to preserve memories of the old building."<sup>23</sup> The wall is however separated by a glass barrier from the adjacent air-conditioned borrowing library. As if to exacerbate its detachment, the wall is encased like a museum object and remained inaccessible to the public until 2012. I visited this red-bricked wall as I conclude this essay in the new white-washed Library. I cannot help but confess my restlessness, owing to the

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<sup>19</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Touching the World" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Multi-Sensory Experience" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 41.

<sup>21</sup> See Hanna Segal, Melanie Klein, (New York: The Viking Press, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Wee Cheryl Faith, "Sculpture garden for book lovers" *The Straits Times*, (16 April 2012), C3.

<sup>23</sup> Wee Cheryl Faith, "Sculpture garden for book lovers" *The Straits Times*, (16 April 2012), C3.

incompatibility of this wall to evoke the emotions and memories charismatically captured in the written accounts that have cajoled me to this place. The reconstructed wall and the remaining entrance pillars at Stamford Street remain cold ceramic memorials, insufficient in conveying memories. Architect Tan Hock Beng captures this eloquently in essence,

“Truth is not based on celebrating the remnant bricks from a demolished building which are then reconstructed to form a ritualised void – on the assumption that such an act can evoke what architectural space and place do.”<sup>24</sup>

The statement that old national library possessed no architectural merit is fallacious because it ignores that the reading of architecture goes beyond “physical form, but simultaneously relies on the physicality of the house for telling its stories.”<sup>25</sup> Like a house, the removal of this library is synonymous with the removal of the people’s stories, the stories that make up our nation. “Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through our senses.”<sup>26</sup> The three bodies and their accounts of the old national library give us a glimpse into how our bodies negotiates with architecture’s sensory details and thus how architecture’s physicality is inexplicitly linked to the construction, association and projection of our precious memories.

(2359 words)

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<sup>24</sup> Tan Hock Beng, "Reconstructing Memories" In *Memories and the National Library: between forgetting and remembering*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Lilian Chee, "An Architecture of Twenty Words: Intimate Details of a Blue Plaque House," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 181-95.

<sup>26</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Task of Architecture" In *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 72.

## Images:

- I: Teo Aldwin, The former site of the Old National Library Building at Stamford Road, Singapore, 2007, Singapore, in Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Old\\_National\\_Library\\_Site.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Old_National_Library_Site.jpg)
  - II. National Library Board Singapore, *This is a view of the staircase leading to the main entrance of the National Library at Stamford Road. Library users can be seen walking along the staircase. Title devised by Library staff.*, 2004, Singapore, in PictureSG, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/pictures/Details/8cdcc194-2081-4e17-bfb6-d5451328a9d8?download=yes>
  - III. National Library Board Singapore, *This is a black and white photograph of the South East Asia Room's interior with its rows of shelves, at the National Library building at Stamford Road. Title devised by Library staff.*, 2004, Singapore, in PictureSG, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/pictures/Details/166c859d-5a98-40d4-90e8-3a12e2a9e9cf>
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