

Field Notes on Design Activism: 6

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The agendas of architectural education and research are increasingly aligned with the demands of corporate practice and external funding opportunities. This neoliberal partnership comes with strings. Ironically, as architectural research and education reconfigure into applied knowledge for use in “real-world scenarios,” outcomes become ever more abstract, distanced from the kinds of lived situations that have traditionally pushed designers to think creatively. In other words, applied outcomes may function, but they often fail to inspire imaginations about what might be — or worse, cease to serve needs that lie outside a funder’s interests. And so, as an educator, scholar, and creative practitioner, I believe that architectural research and education need to be freed from our neoliberalist preoccupations. Architecture needs to recover its diversity of voices and pathways toward engagement with the world. There is more than one way for education and research to be relevant.

Faced with the discipline’s internal antagonism (torn by professional norms), the hostility of the institution (managed by research metrics), and the lack of role models or templates — yet confronted by the urgent need to take action — design activism can assume unexpected and novel forms. Some are strident, others more measured. The works of Forensic Architecture, Parlour, and Edit Collective, amongst others, attest to this multiplicity. Each transforms the tools of the trade — graphical acuity, intelligent lobbying, attentiveness to anomalies — to serve the liveliness of their practices, enhancing their abilities to speak to audiences beyond the discipline.

Historically, activism has been associated with political dissent, and in Singapore, where I teach and research, strident activism is largely perceived as troublemaking. The built environment reflects this social order, emerging from a tightly controlled system of planning, development, and construction. Design activism here needs to be inventive.

To cite a few examples: a citizen-led

campaign emerged in 2011 around Bukit Brown, the city’s oldest Chinese cemetery, when plans for a new highway cutting across the cemetery were announced. Volunteers began to lead guided weekend walks, an ongoing intervention that has aroused public consciousness about the forested burial ground.

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Still from *O3 FLATS: Housing, heartland, home. Three women and Singapore's public housing*, 2014, a film conceived and researched by Lilian Chee, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, and produced by National University of Singapore and 13 Little Pictures Production.



Still from *Objects of Thriving*, 2022, a film by Lilian Chee and Ian Mun, part of the Whampoa Heritage project led by Thomas Kong, design educator at the National University of Singapore.

My own films seek to accomplish something similar. The architectural essay film *03-FLATS*, from 2014, documents the domestic routines of single women in their flats; it is also a work about unspoken restrictions on home ownership in a city where housing policies favor married couples, and are explicitly conditional on heterosexual marriages. In my documentary from this year, *Objects for Thriving*, assumptions about aging and housing are reflected against generic but gendered domestic objects — a sewing machine, a mortar-and-pestle, and household talismans — which appear as affective conduits expressing independence, individuality, and vulnerability. These two research films tactically engage the minutiae of lived existence.

We need to fight for safe spaces where, as Donna Haraway puts it, we can “stay with the trouble.” Challenging orthodoxy may be more effective than tabulating empirical data when it comes to responding to crises in climate instability, inequality, and health. Sometimes, what we need is a radical change of perspective, and the freedom to think otherwise.

— Lilian Chee