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COMPLEXITY, AMBIGUITY AND ETHNICITY: ARCHITECTURAL PROJECTS AT KAMPONG KAPOR, SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

The first Town Plan in colonial Singapore was an ethnic one that segregated the different racial groups into enclaves of the "Chinese", "Malays", "Indians" and other groups. While the real situation of ethnicity definition and occupation in such areas were far more complex on the ground in actuality, these enclaves were invariably perpetuated and inscribed as "Chinatown", "Kampong Glam" and "Little India" for Singapore's tourism industry after Independence from the British transpired in 1965.

Part of the continuing problem of such racial divisions in Singapore is the existence of areas that overlap such official definitions, such as Kampong Kapor. Settled earlier by craftsmen that worked with lime ("kapor") for creating mortar and naturally located next to the brick-making areas between the Rochore and Kallang Rivers, the area is in fact located between the official "Little India" and "Kampong Glam" areas, and share the histories, geographies and complexities of both in contemporary times. It has been acknowledged as an area where the weight and speed of development in Singapore has largely forgotten, where recycling, legalized prostitution, Bollywood, illegal squatters and vegetarian cuisine exist cheek-by-jowl, and where artists, film-makers and new immigrants call their home.

Fourteen first year architecture students were tasked to investigate the area and to propose structures for the residents and visitors based on their understanding, investigations and interpretations. Many of them walked the streets for the first time, and sampled the tastes, sounds and sights of the landscape. The resulting student projects and proposals that I discuss in this paper may suggest that immersion into areas of complexity and ambiguity early in their architectural education may permit creative designers to encounter and deal with these issues head-on rather than cocooned in the conditioned environments of the studio and to work within "safe" and "defined" limits.

Keywords: *Architecture, Singapore, Complexity, Ambiguity, Ethnicity, Student Work*

THE 'ETHNIC" LANDSCAPES OF SINGAPORE

The formation of early segregated ethnic landscapes in Singapore may be attributed to the willful planning of its British colonial administrators. Although English East India Company servant Thomas Raffles had landed in 1819 and established a "factory" on the island with Temenggong Abdul Rahman of the Johore-Riau empire, commercial and personal interests of the different parties caused an unruly settlement pattern on the land area between the Singapore and Rochore Rivers. Having circulated in and learnt lessons from the colonial sphere since 1808, Raffles was aware of the physical

shortcomings of prior settlements of Penang and Bencoolen, and was determined that this project would be administratively and spatially clarified for the directors of the company. Returning from Bencoolen in October 1822 after an absence of 39 months, he was thus annoyed that the first appointed British resident, William Farquhar, had not heeded his instructions regarding the layout of the settlement and had allowed private individuals to occupy land on the northern bank of the Singapore River, areas he had designated for colonial governance. Within a week, he appointed a Town Planning Committee "in order to afford comfort and security to the different descriptions of inhabitants who have resorted to the Settlement and to prevent confusion and disputes hereafter." [1]

Philip Jackson, the appointee for the drawing up of Raffle's Town Plan of 1822, created a plan map that indicated the layout and structure of the emerging town, but it also attempted to deal with the ethnic groups that had settled in Singapore. [2] Raffles appointed the committee to mark out "the quarters or departments of the several classes of the native population," and Jackson's plan showed, on the southern banks of the Singapore River, an area designated for the Chinese, with "Chuliahs" and "Klings" allocated the area further inland on the same side of the river. On the northern banks, a "European Town" was marked out occupying the space between the "Government Area" adjacent to the river, and the Sultan's properties to the northeast, which was flanked by an Arab and Bugis community on each side. This commenced the establishment and delineation of ethnic enclaves on the island for primary purposes of control and development, according to how such groups would fit into the colonial enterprise.

The ensuing development of such enclaves with its internal and negotiated subdivisions, as well as migrations and border definitions, did not occur exactly as planned and sometimes ran counter to colonial dictates. The difficulties of enclave control and containment may be seen in attempts to map colonial street names with colloquial ones in order to find parity in police and judicial descriptions, as well as the failure to accurately name and map particular areas after sub-groups beyond the general ethnic categories. For example, an area near the sultan's property was named "Malay," "Malabar," "Bugis" and "Hylam" Streets as representative of residential ethnic constituencies at the time of naming. These areas quickly changed form as if to demonstrate the failure of such naming. Hylam Street (Hylam: a transliteration of "Hainan") was named for the early Hainanese settlers that lived around Malabar Street. However, the Hainanese soon moved to the Beach Road area and Hylam Street was replaced with the later-immigrant Japanese community. Ironically, Hylam Street itself was later colloquially called "Japan Street" by the Hainanese community and no colonial street named or renamed "Japan Street" to capture the change. The enclaves also moved across the landscape: the planned "Chuliahs" and "Klings" areas in Raffles' plan would later move across the river to settle near Serangoon Road and Rochore River, and the proposed "European Town" was progressively transferred north of the settlement as land was cleared and infrastructure extended.

If textual accounts are anything to go by, the subsequent human landscape of the free port was cosmopolitan in character. A century later, Roland Braddell's 1934 work Lights of Singapore described the cosmopolitan composition of "white people" in colonial Singapore as consisting "English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Americans, Belgians, Danes, Dutch, French, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Norwegians, Portuguese, Russians, Spaniards, Swedes, Swiss and others." [3] Braddell painted a similarly diverse composition of non-white communities on the island, but instead of country origin categorized them into particular ethnic groups and sub-groups as follows:

"Malays": "real" Malays, Javanese, Boyanese, Achinese, Bataks, Banjarese, Bugis, Dyaks, Menangkabau, people from Korinchi, Jambi, Palembang;
"Klings": Tamils, Telugus, Malabaris;
"Bengalis" include Punjabis, Sikhs, Bengalis, Hindustanis, Pathans, Gujeratis, Rajputs, Mahrattas, Parsees, Burmese and Gurkhas;
"Asiatics": Arabs, Singhalese, Japanese, Annamites, Armenians, Filipinos, Oriental Jews, Persians, Siamese and others;
"Chinese": Hok-kiens, Teo-chius, Khehs, Hok-Chias, Cantonese, Hailams, Hok-Chius, and Kwong-Sais.

The convergence of denominations and dialect identities within larger ethnic groupings was an attempt to cognize the multifarious communities, albeit simply and unproblematically. In the process, distinctions that existed between different ethnic sub-groups were blurred or neutralized. Half a century later, the eventual census categories of "Chinese," "Malays," "Indians," and "Others" (abbreviated as CMIO) were formalized essentially after Independence of Singapore was secured in 1965, and now appear to inscribe and denote ethnicity on identity cards of all Singaporeans. The early ethnic enclaves derived from the 1822 plan also became eventually marked as tourism and conservation categories. "Chinatown", "Kampong Glam", and "Little India", together with the "Civic District" that had been formulated after Raffles' instructions, became the palette for a projected CMIO historical and heritage landscape.

KAMPONG KAPOR AS ETHNIC MARGIN

As Braddell had indicated above, the eventual sub-group settlements streamlined into a simplified ethnic palette discounted and glossed over the multiple social identity groups that had developed their own spaces as well as social, cultural and economic practices associated with their ethnic identities during the early history of Singapore. Examples of group-related trade practices from that period would include Teochew gambier planters, Shanghainese furniture makers, Chettiar moneylenders as well as Madurese jockeys at the race course. Spatially, the Jackson plan had indicated the desired locations of the enclaves, but the actual development had not proceeded strictly according to this plan, as suggested by the aforementioned transfer of the "Indian" groups, but also the previously-planned European Town devolving into a second "Chinatown" known colloquially as "siao por". [4]

As expected, various marginal spaces and sub-enclaves formed outside of and despite the Town Plan. Kampong Kapor, an area located between "Little India" and "Kampong Glam", was a district whose origins could be traced, in fact, from the implementation of Raffles' 1822 Town Plan. "Kapor" referred to "lime", a component of mortar used between courses of brick-laying. The early structures and built forms in the colonies were constructed with flammable materials like timber and thatch, causing the start of many fires and damage to important areas in the nascent town. Ordinances across the Malay peninsula and the resulting Straits Settlements mandated buildings to be constructed with more permanent materials such as brick and stone. As Singapore gained importance as a free port in the colonial schema, brick and lime kilns were initiated and developed just outside of the town areas to satisfy and contribute to its rapid urbanization.

George Coleman's 1836 survey map of Singapore indicated the presence of a district of brick kilns just west of the Kallang River. A decade or so later in 1848, local community leader Seah Eu Chin estimated that there were around 500 Cantonese engaged in brick making. [5] Judging from temple records, several of these brick kilns located between the Rochor and Kallang Rivers would probably have been in existence since mid-19th century. [6] At around the same time, the large number of lime kilns existing in the Serangoon Road area operated by South Asian groups led locals to name it "Soonambu Kamban" or "Village of Lime", transposed into Malay as "Kampong Kapor". [7]

Kampong Kapor's physical existence between official "Indian" and "Malay" areas qualifies it as a spatial and ethnic margin. The location of early Chinese vegetable gardens and crop farms in its vicinity, as well as other "border areas" of the second Chinatown to its west and "Chinese" settlers along the Rochore and Kallang Rivers to its east, suggests its environs as a marvellously-complicated ethnic landscape that "defied" the clarity demanded in Raffles' plan. The many religious buildings around Kampong Kapor may serve as indication of its multi-ethnic nature: Veeramakaliaman Hindu Temple built by the lime kiln workers, Abdul Gaffoor Mosque (1907) built by South Asian and Baweanese Muslims, Kampong Kapor Methodist Church (1930) [8] originally the Straits Chinese Methodist Church with multilingual services and further east, the Man San Fook Tuck Chee Temple (c.1885) donated by Cantonese sawmill and brick kiln operators.

Besides these larger structures, the Kampong Kapor area comprised mainly streets flanked on both sides by shophouses as well as two-storeyed quarters for colonial civil servants. The insertion of several high-rise public apartment flats in the second half of the 20th century created several towers from which the otherwise low-rise districts could be panoptically observed. Otherwise, the area has propitiously escaped the relentless momentum of development that had gripped the rest of Singapore. The conserved area of "Little India" has sustained its enclave character while serving its role as a sanctioned tourism and heritage district. Elsewhere, the presence of Bollywood, second-hand goods dealers, homeless immigrants, a red-light district and a thieves market, etc., has helped maintain the richness it has long been known for. The recent arrival of art galleries, film makers and other artists has only intensified the area as a complex space that stimulates the senses in so many ways.

KAMPONG KAPOR AS SITE FOR STUDENT PROJECTS

The opportunity to use Kampong Kapor as an exploration site for architecture students arose for me in the second semester of the 2007-8 academic year at the National University of Singapore. After the first semester where students were introduced to the various methods of architectural representation, the challenge of the year's final project centred around context and place. Rather than using the suggested areas in the general brief of "Little India" and "Kampong Glam", which meant returning to those officially-sanctioned categories as discussed above, the students were asked to examine Kampong Kapor. They were told to study the district as architecture students and to comprehend events and processes as they encountered them on the ground. For the six-week exercise, two were devoted to site visits and recording, and the subsequent four in developing hypothetical architectural projects based on their experiences.

The fourteen students were divided into three groups to study particular zones within Kampong Kapor, each reporting activities, streetscapes and particularities of the assigned zone. In addition, each student was to write a short impression prose essay of their visit as an initial preamble for addressing issues they had come across. The impression essays were revealing as many seemed to have encountered that area spatially for the first time. Most were largely descriptive, but several attempted to write in prose and to register rather perceptive characteristics of the site, such as "stubborn", "dangerous", "hidden", "legal and illegal" and "appalling". One student, Woon Shu Yi mused:

"Refusing all alterations, it stirred the colours, washed them together until all came together as a muddy, sludge-like grey, the bright colours indistinguishable. The inhabitants it squeezed together, narrowing its streets and alleyways. Pushed together, the people once so carefully done up, became nothing more than a bobbing sea of muddy grey. Back to where they were before, and then the city was satisfied."

The students were encouraged to return to site to build on what they had discovered, at different times and weather conditions, to find out if temporal factors altered the spaces, people and activities at Kampong Kapor, supplemented by discussions and presentations in the design studio of their findings as well as emerging from them, the choice of an issue or activity that they would commence designing for. Progressively, the initial encounters permitted a familiarity with aspects and issues on site, which was evident not only in the way that more "layers" or "complexities" were brought up for discussion, but also the eventual selection of individual design projects by the students themselves. For example, there were increasing discussions about aspects of density, patina, marginal, hidden and temporal practices. The descriptor "Indian" soon gave way to "South Asians", and for some of them, "Bangladeshi" was used in place of "Indian" on recognition that more than one sub-ethnic group existed. Some noticed that the textual materials like advertisement signs and notices had more than one type of inscription although they originally looked "Indian". More importantly, there was a realization that the district was multi-ethnic instead of predominantly the "Little India" that they had been told.

The increasing familiarity with the area could, in some ways, be perceived from the manner that the students selected projects. Loh Wan Xuan discovered the existence of the Singapore After-

Care Association that provided counselling and rehabilitation of former convicts, but whose modernist facades belied the nature of its purpose and daily operation. Her conversion of the ground level of the premises into a small restaurant and sale of items made by its charges acknowledged that spatial design and programming had a role to play in creating an interface for these former offenders with the public at large. In a similar vein, Vanessa Baey discovered that the less-than-ideal sewage works caused flooding of various alleys and streets the result of which was the design of a series of tensile roofs and an undulating timber platform to mark those floods but also to create a space for nearby residents to gather and communicate.

Other students discovered particular traits and designed for them. Yvonne Lee converted a traffic island near the Kampong Kapor Methodist Church into a bicycle-park and a refreshment area. On the same triangular site, Hiu Pui Ser was concerned about the lack of play areas for neighbourhood children and hence proposed a series of small towers and rope bridges to permit their claim to the adjacent areas. Ng Min designed a shop for the sale of phone cards and mobile phones, while Chin Qian Lyn created a backpackers' resource centre to aid foreign travellers whose first encounters must be as refreshing but confusing as that of the students. At another long-established corner site, Hu Lin Yuan combined various fragments of a karang-guni shop, a newspaper recycler and a vegetable shop to create a new upper storey structure commenting on the possibility of connections.

By all accounts, the community that most influenced the students' choice of design projects was the South Asian foreign workers who had sought refuge in the enclave, if not in inexpensive lodging spaces then the public five-foot ways converted into their respite for the night. Many are still stranded after arrival in Singapore due to unscrupulous middle-men on the promise of a job and a better life, and await lorries each morning in the hope of finding work, albeit illegally. Seven students designed structures for them or in relation to its other residential communities. In what he has termed the Upper Weld Wash, Cedric Tan created a laundry and clothes-drying deck area at a corner site with some existing trees. Working with these trees, a double-storey platform structure with a central wall transformed at one edge into a sculptural waterspout for the purposes of manual clothes-washing and a space for socialization. Further on, coin-operated washing machines and clothes drying-racks permit the users to convene for the much neglected activity for which the workers could not otherwise perform. Richie Chan's ShowerSpa combined two activities on two levels: the ground floor level as a communal shower area for the neighbouring groups, while the upper level was designed as several spa rooms that were entered from the shophouse hotel next to it, and to cater to its patrons and/or others in the nearby red light district. The celebration of water's cleansing properties was evident as he articulated the interlocking spaces within a timber structure that attended to the shophouse forms in the vicinity. On the student's insistence, a small residence for a lady and her dog often seen on the site, was incorporated.

Noticing that a separate sub-enclave had emerged at the Lembu Road open space, Woon Shu Yi created a two-storey platform structure primarily for its Bangladeshi community who would crowd and pack the area at particular times as if to defy any accepted notion of human proximity at particular times not found elsewhere in Singapore the added levels create spaces where congregation may be connoted in other forms and in the process, the ideas of privacy and intimacy questioned. On the same site as Richie, Albert Liang designed a space he called Mucsage where blind masseurs are guided by curved walls and features into the structure and where they work to relieve previously-tensioned bodies in a seemingly symbiotic way within the milieu. The curved elements created amidst its robust external angular structure of the Mucsage, perhaps, was a commentary of contrasts and meetings enabled by the site's complex network of users.

The three remaining projects are also consistent in dealing with concerns about this group. Aileen Koh devised an elegant and modular frame structure to be inserted into the backlanes to create extendible sleeping platforms adjacent to both walls defining the lane. Above these and within the same structure, the platform connects the backyards of the houses to serve as an informal meeting area or for storage of household items. Grace Cheong's design was to address the fact that these foreign workers were rather regular patrons at Desker Road, the

famed red light district in Singapore. Capitalising on this, she designed informal/anonymous counselling booths amidst an elevated walkway system that would otherwise be hidden from view during the "regular" operation of that backlane, but could serve to provide the workers information and advice about legal issues and work procedures, etc. Finally, Traysy Tan inserted an open-air bar structure which is transformed in the evenings from several otherwise ordinary structures. The daily recreation is accompanied by an advertisement balloon as well as the choice of serving beers from Asia and Africa to reflect the potential patrons of the space.

The projects' main aim of dislodging students from familiarity was largely achieved through the articulation of student architectural projects at Kampong Kapor. Though the eventual execution of the projects' designs was uneven and which depended on the skills and understanding of each student, the mixture of group work as well as individual projects permitted a cross-studio general cognizance of the complexities, ambiguities and other characteristics of Kampong Kapor. The resistance to using simple ethnic categories as well as the careful consideration of its different actors and spaces within the area were noted when the final designs were presented. Along with design-based learning, the students devised objectives and functions that corresponded to the site, and over the four weeks of design continually refined premises they set for themselves.

In conceiving first-year studio exercises, there had been tendencies for educators to conduct exercises without contexts or sites to limit learning objectives and to closely monitor outcomes. The pedagogical logic is that such complexity may be introduced as project sizes are enlarged and programmes more challenging. The Kampong Kapor projects took the other approach of respecting the students' potential grasp of site forces. It has perhaps demonstrated that the immersion of architecture students in complex environments could educe corresponding responses and attitudes, and not to regard environments as simple and essential settings. If such projects lead to future designers who can begin to appreciate the role that complexities and ambiguities play in spatial development, these same students may perhaps become more sensitive designers who will make our creative cities in the future.

NOTES & REFERENCES

[1]   Town Planning Committee, as quoted in T.H.H. Hancock, Coleman's Singapore, p. 16.
[2]   Lee Kip Lin noted that Raffles formulated his plan to divide the town into "neighbourhoods" or "campongs" as early as his second visit to Singapore in June 1819. From [3] Lee Kip Lin, The Singapore House 1819-1942, p. 17.
[3]   Roland Braddell, The Lights of Singapore, pp. 43-45.
[4]   In 2001, I created an installation known as "Second Chinatown" at the Nokia Art 2001 comprising a series of maps indicating where the "first" and "second" ones were located. "Siao Por" in Chinese referred to "small town" and which was used in deference to Kreta Ayer area, designated as "Da Por" or "big town".
[5]   Siah U Chin, "The Chinese in Singapore", Journal of the Indian archipelago & East Asia, Series 1 Vol. 2, 1848, p. 290.
[6]   Ang Yik Han etal., A Boon Returned: the History of the Mun San Fook Tuck Chee, pp. 138-143.
[7]   Gopal Das, The Kaliaman Temple, Serangoon Road; unpublished dissertation, p. 19.
[8]   This church was inaugurated in 1894 and moved to its present location in 1930. Its name was changed to Kampong Kapor Methodist Church and held services in Henghua, Hakka, Malay, Foochow and English. From Earnest Lau and SE Jedudason, Lest We Forget 1894-1994, pp. 29-32.