

ARCASIA FORUM 12: NEGOTIATED TERRITORIES

Sub-theme: City and Its Context

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Abstract: The main focus of this paper is the informal appropriation of the city by its inhabitants for commercial, social and religious purposes. These actions are often accompanied and expressed by self-initiated and constructed situations or structures that are either individually or collectively sustained in public spaces. They co-exist with the "official" built spaces in the city through various forms of negotiations, accommodations, adaptations and sustenance. Though informal, discreet and at times unlawful in their existences, they nevertheless are an important part of the community's character, identity and network of economic and social relationships in the city. The context of this paper is set against the rapid and centrally planned urbanization process in Singapore, where the contest and interplay between tradition and progress, specificity and universality, spontaneous and planned, local and global are enacted in everyday encounters in the city. The paper will trace, identify and examine the network of relationships that are built and evolved around the negotiated territories. Their forms and tactics of appropriation as well as the material expressions of these negotiated territories. The city is inexplicably connected to the manifold dimensions of life and of living. It is the locus and stream of our collective participations, actions and imaginations. The underlying theme of this paper is that the diversity, open-ended and sometimes contradictory qualities of contemporary life must be recognized and drawn upon as opportunities for any creative actions by architects in the city. *Negotiated Territories*, therefore is a presentation of a facet of spatial practices and habitations in the city that has persisted along side the onslaught of globalization and thrived within the formal, officially sanctioned urban environment of Singapore.

Key Words: self-initiated, negotiations, territories, city, spatial practices

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I wish to present the city as a social setting constituted by everyday human interactions, negotiations, adaptations and contestations with the built environment. Rather than conceptualizing the city from a broad and global perspective, the paper will focus on local acts of informal spatial appropriations by its inhabitants that are place bounded and socially constructed. The acts of informal appropriations often transgress urban territoriality that is sanctioned by legal systems or state laws. David Storey defines *territory* as a portion of geographical space which is claimed or occupied by a person, a group of persons or by an institution while the process whereby individuals or groups lay claim to such territory is referred to as "territoriality". (Storey, 2001, 1) By placing an object within the parking space to prevent use by other motorists, erecting a boundary wall around a residential development or planting a sign post in an open field that says "state land", these territorial acts are claims to ownership and exclusivity at different scales, degrees of validity and durations in the city. Ownership, even if transient, implies control of land and the power to determine its use and access. Negotiated territories, however, is a form of long term spatial

occupation in the city, which do not suggest actual ownership or full control of the land. It exists within the interstitial spaces in the city and takes advantage of gaps and cracks in the official built environment



Figure 1, 2 & 3. Territorial claims at different scales, validities and durations.

THE OFFICIAL CITY

The general perception of a visitor to Singapore is the highly organized, efficient and orderly environment. Much of this can be attributed to the far-reaching role of the government in planning and regulating all forms of its citizen's private and public lives. The extent of this drive for control can be seen at different levels and scales in the city. In public housing developments, there are signs indicating the forms of activities that are prohibited at the communal spaces below each housing block. These activities are deemed to be undesirable and a public nuisance to the residents. Spaces for outdoor display cases and shelves are carefully outlined in yellow boxes along covered walkways. The boxes set the territorial boundaries for where the displays can be located outside the shops. Similarly, lines are drawn along the floors of subway train stations instructing the public the correct form of actions and behaviors.



Figure 4. No parking sign



Figure 5. Prohibited activities

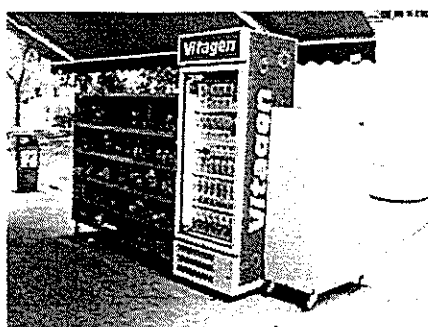


Figure 6. Spaces defined for outdoor displays



Figure 7. Where to stand in a subway station

Therefore, if the city is a tangible manifestation of the shapes and patterns of public life, then Singapore expresses an intriguing tension between the centrally conceived visions of the city by politicians, planners and architects and the spontaneous, informal appropriations of spaces by its inhabitants. This is especially fascinating in Singapore, where a deterministic and centralized form of urban design, planning and control has characterized the country's urbanization process since its independence 38 years ago. (Perry, Kong, Yeoh, 1997) Singapore's aspiration to be a city that is cosmopolitan, globally connected and attractive for businesses in the 21st century was clearly manifested in July 2001, when the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) completed the Concept Plan that will determine the physical development of Singapore for the next 40 to 50 years. (URA, 2001) Unlike the first Concept Plan launched in 1971, which focused on getting the newly independent nation towards the path of economic development and resolving urgent housing and social needs, (Perry, Kong, Yeoh, 1997) the Concept Plan of 2001 takes on a different challenge in creating choices for a more sophisticated population in areas of housing and recreation, as well as instilling a sense of belonging among the highly mobile young. In the area of business development, the Concept Plan aims to remake Singapore into a "Global Business Centre" (URA, 2001, 31) that is nimble in response to changing business climate, globally connected via the latest telecommunication technologies and convenient though well organized transportation networks. (URA, 2001) The plan was comprehensive, meticulous and all inspiring in both its aspiration and presentation. These visions were promoted systematically and publicly through several large-scale exhibitions complete with models and images projecting the new enhanced lifestyles and opportunities for living, working and recreation.



Figure 8. URA Gallery

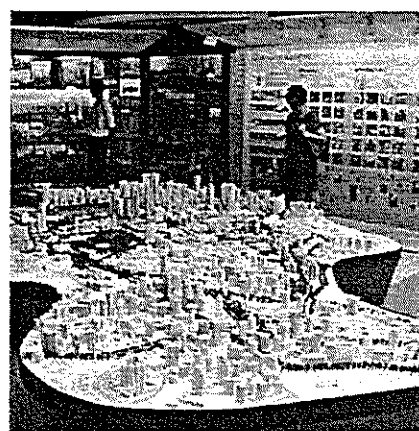


Figure 9. Exhibition of at the URA lobby

The following chapters will focus on specific groups of city dwellers that have appropriated parts of the city for their own use, either individually or collectively. Often, these spatial appropriations do not fall neatly into the bold visions of the URA for a global city of the 21st century nor within the acceptable actions and behaviors sanctioned by the authorities. In some ways, they are forms of tacit local resistances that have persisted alongside the mainstream of society and "official" built environment through a whole range of economic, social and spatial adaptations and negotiations.

COBBLERS IN PEOPLES' PARK SQUARE

A distinct feature in the public open space bounded by the People's Park Complex, the Majestic Theatre and the People's Park Centre is the community of street cobblers plying their trade. This open space is a hive of activities and people throughout the day and into the night. The presence of seats, plantings, street level retail shops, kiosks, cooked food stalls and the recently open Chinatown Mass Rapid Transit station all contributed significantly to its success as a public square.

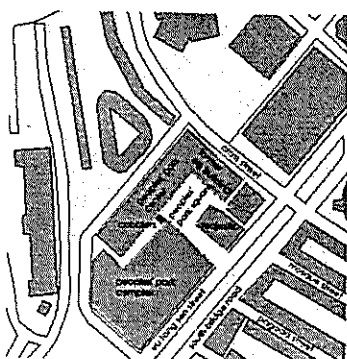


Figure 10. Location of Cobblers



Figure 11. Mass Transit Station



Figure 12. Seats and Plantings

The cobblers have set up their individual stalls in this square in Chinatown for several years. They do not pay rent but are required to obtain a license to operate their stalls. The cobblers form a close cluster providing a similar service based on unspoken operational and occupancy rules among them. One of the cobblers we interviewed has been working here for the past seventeen years. He works ten hours a day, starting at nine in the morning and ends at seven in the evening. He works alone and learnt his trade informally, through observation, trial and error and practice. He estimated that on a good day, he has up to twenty transactions.



Figure 13. Clusters of cobblers



Figure 14. Mr. Ling, the cobbler

There are three forms of spatial appropriations. The first involves forming a cluster along a busy covered link way between two buildings. The second form is by occupying the steps leading from the Peoples' Park Centre towards the square. Both forms of appropriations enable maximum exposure to potential customers and protection from the weather, while the second one has an added advantage of using the short flight of steps as additional display and storage spaces. The last takes the form of occupying the space beneath the shopping complex open-air staircase. The lone cobbler underneath this staircase shares his space with a used cardboard collector and a key maker. Although it offers him shelter from the sun, it also reduces his visibility to any potential customers. Each cobbler covers an average territorial space of about 2m by 2m. Chairs for the customers are generally placed at the extreme edges to define their territorial boundaries. Besides marking their territory, the chairs are means to draw and keep anyone who comes to enquire about prices. Once seated, the chances of agreeing to the repair are higher. Some cobblers also use the chairs as additional workspaces. Sometimes, an overhead umbrella is planted to provide additional shelter from the

sun while boxes overturned are used as display and worktables. Some are later transformed into storage spaces for their tools and materials. The manner and attitude is a mixture of efficacy, spontaneity and improvisation.



Figure 15. Lining the covered link way Figure 16. Using the existing steps

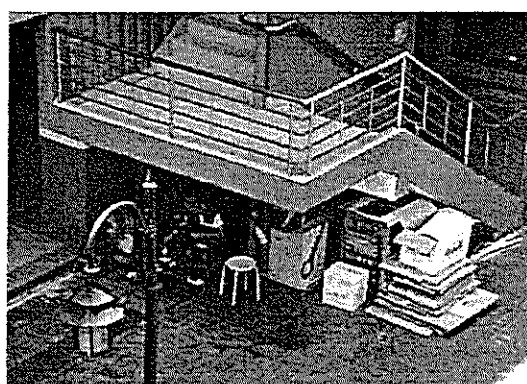


Figure 17. Using the space beneath the staircase

The cobblers do not leave their “shop” at the site of operation after the end of the day. Instead, each of the items is carefully stored in the boxes, which are later stacked on top of a trolley. Other belongings like chairs and stools are neatly compacted within this trolley space. The cobbler we interviewed pushes the trolley, together with all other items to an area behind his site where he has kept a delivery tricycle with a lockable storage cabinet. The more valuable tools and equipments are kept under lock and key while the plastic chairs are simply chained over and left at the top of the tricycle. Another cobbler pushes his compacted “workspace” to the third floor of the relatively vacant adjacent shopping complex, where it is chained to one corner of the corridor.



Figure 18. Compacted workspace



Figure 19. Storage for compacted workspace



Figure 20. Storage in the shopping complex



Figure 21. Moving the "shop"

Although the cobblers are required by the authorities to have a valid license to operate their trade, this requirement is not strictly enforced. One of the cobblers we interviewed possesses a license that has been expired for the past two years. During occasional checks and visits from the licensing unit, the officer would reprimand him and also have his particulars and photos taken. His manner of dealing with this delicate situation is to remain silent and not provoke the officer further. So far, the authorities have not removed his store or banned him from plying his trade. However, this is his second location as he was asked to leave from the previous one after complaints from neighboring shop owners. Between the cobblers, there is a tacit agreement as to where each one can set up their stalls. It depends on the combination of factors such as where are the heaviest pedestrian traffics in the area, whoever was there first and their relative distance from each other. The clustering of cobblers in a specific location ensured a high visibility for their trade, a larger consumer base and a degree of cooperation. The relationship among the community of cobblers has been one of maintaining a cordial, respectful distance from each other. Cooperation among them involves keeping an eye on each other's store while each goes off for their meals or occasional trips to the toilets. Some cobblers do not only ply their trade at the square but also use the space as a social gathering place. Friends will drop by to chat or just pass their time reading the newspaper. The economic and the social space of the cobblers are closely intertwined.



Figure 22. Intertwining of economic and social spaces

USED CARDBOARD COLLECTORS IN CHINATOWN

Nestled among the buildings in the financial districts in Singapore and other parts of the city are groups of used cardboard collectors. They operate individually and in groups to collect cardboard boxes, used papers and other discarded documents from office cleaners and near by residents. These collectors are part of a larger network of informal workers supporting Singapore companies engaged in the recycling business. For this paper, we have focused on a group of collectors in the Chinatown district. This group of collectors has been operating for the past 2 years. It comprises of a husband and wife team who works ten hours a day and seven days a week. Everyday, about thirty to fifty transactions are made. Besides cardboard boxes, the group also collects used newspapers, used office papers and cans. The collections are sent to factories located at the outskirts of Singapore where they are sorted, compacted and sent overseas for recycling.



Figure 23. Collectors in the city

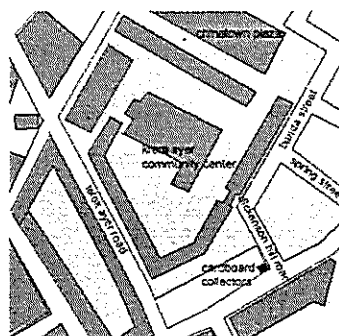


Figure 24. Location in Chinatown



Figure 25. Chinatown collectors

Although at first glance their choice of location and placement of artifacts and belongings seem random and spontaneous, a closer examination reveals otherwise. The husband and wife team chooses an open-air car park for their collection point. The car park is conveniently and strategically located off the busy main road at the junction of Neil and Dickson Hill Road. It is close to several offices and public housing developments, where most of the their customers are working and living. The location is also highly visible all round. The car park allows easy and quick loading of the used cardboards and papers while the concrete pavement adjacent to the road enables them to set up a collection and weighing point. Several large mature trees along the pavement provide shade from the heat and glare of the afternoon sun. One of the trees not only serve as a point of orientation and identification but also as a means of keeping their belongings.



Figure 26. Tactically located for ease of loading, shade and visibility



Figure 27. Storage tree

Personal belongings are kept to a minimum. It consists mainly of a few plastic chairs, water bottles, a weighing machine to measure the quantity of used cardboards or papers received, a small bag, some plastic carriers for personal belongings, an umbrella, a trolley for transporting large quantities of collections, a plastic tray and a fortune cat good luck charm. Other than the weighing machine and the trolleys, which are chained to the tree when not used, the rest of the belongings are removed from the site at the end of the workday. The couple has occasional visits from public health officers and car-parking attendants. Given the sensitive nature of their spatial appropriation, they reassured representatives from the authorities that their trade will not hinder the operation of the car park, nor the collection is of any health and safety concerns. An unwritten rule is that none of the combustible materials will be left behind at the end of the day and the couple will sweep and tidy up the place before leaving.

Two forms of networks of relationships can be identified. First they are part of a larger network of informal collectors spanning across different parts of the city. Economically, the factories depend on these informal "freelancers", as one of managing director of the factory describes their role, to supply them with the used cardboards and papers. This form of economic relationship is mutually beneficial. On the part of the factory owners, it avoids any legal or contractual arrangement, does not restrict the factory to any one supplier or freelancer but enjoys the advantages of a decentralized network of suppliers and does not costs the factory to

sustain the activities. This enables the factories to be more competitive and responsive to the fluctuating economic conditions, both local and abroad. For the senior citizens, the collection and selling of used cardboards and papers provide them opportunities to engage in some form of employment and help them earn extra incomes to complement the state given financial support. Secondly, this collection point in the Chinatown district has also become a gathering spot for some of the residents to trade and share local news and gossips. The couple's activities are well known to the shop owners in the Chinatown Plaza located several hundreds of meters away, as they make regular stops at the plaza to collect used cardboards from some less mobile senior citizens.



Figure 28. Compacted cardboards and papers in factory



Figure 29. Chinatown Plaza

FOREST OF 10 THOUSAND DEITIES

An interesting feature of the urban landscape in Singapore is the occasional sprinkling of abandoned Chinese religious altars lying next to a tree, along a discreet part of a public space or at road junctions. These altars and deities are "left behind" when the previous owners relocate to another home and did not bring their existing ones along. Or they are abandoned after the death of the older generation, if the rest in the family do not continue the same religious practices. On the other hand, some make shift shrines are erected by individuals or groups in their work and living spaces to express their gratitude for a prayer answered or to ensure a harmonious environment.



Figure 30. Road side altars

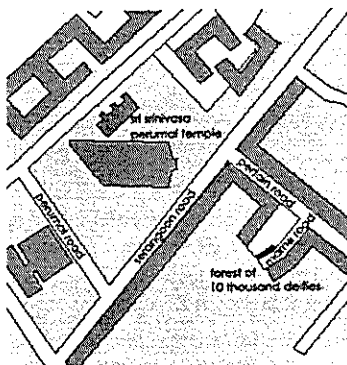


Figure 31. Location of Shrine

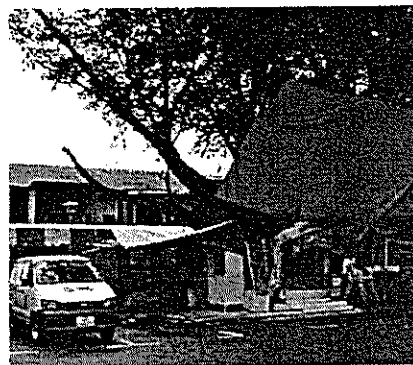


Figure 32. Forest of Ten Thousand Deities



Figure 33. Collection of altars Figure 34. Altar in grotto form

The Forest of Ten Thousand Deities is an informally organized and constructed shrine located along a group of terrace houses in one of Singapore's red light district. The shrine straddles between a vehicular road fronting the terrace houses and an existing car park. The terrace houses are used as brothels where the sex workers live and work. The shrine is spread informally across a three-meter wide planting strip and symbolically centered on an old Banyan tree. The owner of an air-conditioning repair company who has since relocated to another place originally started its construction. Through the years, however, the brothel owners have contributed to its growth and assumed ownership of this shrine. Gradually, it has grown to occupy a territory of approximately thirty square meters. From the trunk of the tree, elaborate permanent and semi-permanent constructions spring forth to provide a proper and respectable setting for the offering of prayers and conducting of rituals. The sacredness of the Banyan tree is both revered and celebrated through these constructions. The tree god is housed within a grotto like space and is set four steps from the ground. The immediate space is carefully paved with yellow tiles while a yellow canvas canopy both provides practical shade for the shrine and announces its symbolic presence. One of the edifices in this community shrine was constructed to pay reverence to a cobra that was believed to reside within the depths of the tree. The newer constructions offer temporary shelters for the large collection and diversity of deities and altars deposited here by previous owners. All the shelters are placed centrifugally from the tree. In addition, the shelters form a loosely defined boundary demarcating a private territory behind, which the caretakers and regular visitors to this shrine gather and socialize. Chairs, discarded cupboards, tables, canvas sheets and other recycled items make up the loosely assemblage of furniture.



Figure 35. Cobra altar



Figure 36. Private space



Figure 37. Housing for the deities



Figure 38. Deities in transit

In time, this community shrine, with its large collection of deities sheltered under the symbolic Banyan tree came to be known by its visitors and caretakers as the Forest of Ten Thousand Deities. The caretakers claimed there were neither significant interventions nor problems encountered with the authorities over their informal appropriation of the planting strip for the shrine or using the public street during religious festivals. A number of the regular visitors come to this shrine in the evening to chat and socialize. Some live a distance from the shrine and are introduced by friends to this place. The caretakers will clean and tidy the place, retrieve any money from the donation boxes distributed among the various altars, refill the joss sticks containers or replace the offerings to the deities with fresh ones. A few of the more opportunistic ones will come to this shrine during lottery days to give offerings to the various deities in the hope of winning the day's draw. Others will "ask" for auspicious numbers for the lottery draw. All the deities housed here are in some way "in transit". Although previous owners left them here, however, if anyone wishes to adopt any of them, all they need to do is to inform the main caretaker and performed a simple ritual to obtain permission and blessing to bring a particular deity home.

During religious festivals, the street between the shrine and the brothels takes on a whole different character. The caretakers of the shrine would appropriate this public space for larger scale religious celebrations. Spatially, the territory of the shrine is extended through modular tents set up to shelter the deities and invited guests. The use of the street as a public thoroughfare is momentarily suspended. Instead, it is spatially appropriated as a ground for communal religious celebrations, where the brothel owners, sex workers and guests collectively participate. Although the territorial claim of The Forest of Ten Thousand Deities is informal and negotiated, it nevertheless has evolved to become a distinct locality that serves as a point of orientation, focus and interactions for this community and others who travel here from afar. It provides the stage for the expression of the community's social cohesion, identity and aspirations, which otherwise, would be silent against the incessant noise and speed of the officially sanctioned urban environment.



Figure 39. Make shift tent in the street



Figure 40. Musicians add to the festive atmosphere



Figure 41 and 42. Communal feasts and celebrations involving brothel owners, sex workers and guests

CONCLUSION

The three examples of negotiated territories presented in this paper develop different forms and tactics of spatial appropriations by responding to the dynamics of local conditions. Despite their ad hoc nature, marginal and contradictory existences in relationship to the visions of the URA for a 21st century global city, negotiated territories are nevertheless, authentic and creative attempts by city dwellers in shaping their own immediate environment. What these territories lack in sophistication and refinement of professionally conceived spaces are compensated by the ingenious use of limited resources at hand, the improvisational response to site and programme and the solidarity of collective local actions. Furthermore, they eschew conventional singular, static and totalizing visions of cities often envisaged by architects, urban designers and planners. Instead, these local actions of place makings involve active and continuous engagements, negotiations, accommodations, cooperations and adjustments. The process is highly organic, improvisational and spontaneous. Notions of identity, meaning or sense of place are not received, static or unitary. They are constructed through relations between self and community. They are situational, responsive, inclusive and evolves with time. To perceive the city in this manner is particularly refreshing and inspiring for an architect. It reminds architects of their contract with society and the act of architecture as fundamentally an ordering of life. It is an act that requires the architect's care, judgment, empathy and generosity towards the environment he or she is designing. The design of cities, the locus and stream of our collective lives, actions and imaginations, therefore, is not only the tasks of the professionals or selected members of the public but one that must mobilize community involvement, support and imagination by tapping into diverse and rich local knowledge and insights. (Lim, 1990) Framed within the effects and processes of globalization, negotiated territories also serve as a counterpoint to the myth that globalization has reduced the significance of place.

The highly mobile, fluid and speed of capital, communications as well as the transnational nature of the global economies have not rendered place irrelevant. (Sassen, 1999) Instead, an intertwined, complex ecology of sustenance and interdependence between production, place and culture is manifested, reinforced by a more subtle and shifting form of territorial boundaries in the city.

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