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RECLAIM LAND:
THE FIGHT FOR SPACE IN SINGAPORE

http://reclaimland.sg

(Illustrated Feature Writing)

By

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Moderators:
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SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

The lack of space is a perennial challenge that Singapore faces as a small city-state. Currently with just over 700 square kilometres of land, the state argues it has little choice but to carry out centralised urban planning so that our land’s potential for living comfort and economic gains is maximised. While this has created a secure and modern city, it still struggles to meet the diverse needs of its people.

In the following stories, we look at how people living in a small city-state create their own spaces and the various issues that arise from their actions:

Economic Space

Less money, more space

The state believes that economics is the best way to distribute space in this land-scarce city. But when the cost of land, or rent, is the major determinant of how space is used and for whom, the diversity of the cityscape and its possibilities get compromised. This story looks at street hawking and how it circumvents rent, to explore how economics can hamper alternative livelihoods, especially in these tough times.

A sticky situation

Seen as vandals in the eyes of the state and regarded by many as inconsiderate, street advertisers continue to plaster the walls of our buildings, bus shelters and lampposts with their stickers and flyers. This story is a writer’s personal journey to confront them, only to find out the difficulties faced by small businesses here and how street advertising can creatively get around expensive media outlets.
Community Space

The gardeners’ city

In a country where most of its people live in high-rise public housing, gardening has been largely restricted. Very often, gardening enthusiasts take over narrow corridors and common property of the housing estates, only to find themselves in trouble with the town councils that manage these areas. These authorities fear that problems – including complaints of dengue breeding and fire safety – might arise if residents were allowed free reign of these spaces. This story examines the tension and describes how tight regulation impedes the growth of the grassroots and a community. It also leads to a dependence on the state to resolve all problems, big and small.

Elderly Space

Balek kampung

The rapid modernisation of Singapore resettled an older generation, who used to live in kampungs (village in Malay), into concrete public housing estates. This episode has affected a group of elderly Singaporeans, who lament the loss of community spirit with the kampungs’ dearth. While the state has tried over the years to revive this spirit with their community centres and residents’ corners, our story of a farm plot in Clementi shows how it is less the material comforts of a facility than the group’s shared memories that bind people together.

Youth Space

Kings of chaos

Skateboarders are often seen as rebellious youth who damage public property and cause a nuisance wherever they play. While the state has built designated
skate parks for them, many find them too crowded and simply less exciting than the city’s streets. Our story follows a group of young skateboarders and a skateboarding shop owner as they try to claim a space at an estate at Margaret Drive for their own. We then take a tour with the skaters to see how they bring alive a city emptied by night, where they transform urban structures into skate obstacles.

*Foreign Space*

**Not such a little India**

The sheer number of foreign workers that have come to Singapore in recent years have led to them spilling out onto public places, including empty fields and pavements in areas like Geylang, Jurong and Little India. They often live in cramped dormitories that lack facilities and at the same time, find the city’s way of life unfamiliar. In our story, the foreign workers take over places where locals have abandoned. They show that it does not take a lot of effort or money to redefine a space into something that resembles what they are used to having.

*Religious Space*

**Finding the faith**

Beneath the veneer of modernity outlined by shopping malls and office towers lies another side of Singapore that is still steeped in religiosity. Whether it is Taoist or Buddhist altars or Muslim prayer rooms, Singaporeans keep their own little spaces to find a peace of mind in this bustling city.

*Imagined Space*

**Multipli-City**

The state often argues that the limitations of this small city mean not all kinds
of users can be accommodated into a single space. This photography series reveals the duality of space usage in a single location by mapping double exposures onto a single composite image. By doing so, it questions the fallacy of smallness and makes one rethink the possibilities of co-existence.

All these stories are found online in a website, *Reclaim Land: The fight for space in Singapore* (http://reclaimland.sg), which also contains related photo galleries, multimedia clips, resources and Question-and-Answer (Q&A) transcripts with academics on city planning.

**BACKGROUND ON TOPIC**

Singapore’s small size, the state argues, is why it has little choice but to carry out “judicious land use planning” (URA, 2009) to ensure Singapore’s economic survival. To this extent, it has dominated city planning, so much so that architect Rem Koolhaas (1997) once described it as such:

"It is pure intention: If there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity.”

Such strong central planning has modernised Singapore into a First World city. From comprehensive transport systems to clean streets to grooming the country into a Garden city, the state has done well to create a comfortable environment for its people.

Singapore is consistently ranked as one of world’s most business-friendly cities (World Bank, 2009). Its public housing programme, which houses about 84 percent of the population, has also won international accolades and been a model for developing cities (Pisik, 2008).

While state planning has done well in providing the hardware, various surveys and critics have questioned this city’s liveability. Singapore was ranked 32 out of 215 countries in Mercer’s (2008) “Quality Of Living” survey that helps corporations decide where to place
employees internationally. In the same year, it dropped five places to 22 in a survey by 
current affairs magazine, Monocle, of the top 25 most liveable cities (Sim, 2008). The drop, 
according to its editor, was because Singapore was not tolerant enough of different lifestyles 
and suffered from over planning (Oon, 2008). In Ooi’s Future Of Space: Planning, Space and 
The City (2004), she argues that Singapore’s strong central urban planning has created a city 
“characterised by spaces of indifference, populated by those who have little stake and even 
less interest in the city”. Such apathy is why Singaporeans are increasingly ready to 
immigrate and feel little attachment to this land.

But the city is not just a product of its planners, it is also contested by its people. Sociologist 
Frank Tonkiss (2005) argued:

"Who and what a city is for is a matter of diverse social, economic and cultural claims. 
These competing claims open onto conflicts over space and power, cut lines of 
division and difference in the city, and are taught out in disputes over meaning and 
representation"

Several scholars (Ooi, 2004; Lim, 1990; Franck & Stevens, 2007) have also noted that the 
people’s participation is essential in creating a city that can better accommodate their diverse 
needs. This issue can be examined critically by looking at the Singapore city as “text” so as to 
see “plural, co-existing meanings in urban landscapes” (Goh, 2005).

With this in mind, Singapore is no longer a product of a well-executed master plan of the 
state, but a site of various contestations that its people could have an effect on. Our project 
looks at how individuals find ways around the state’s plans to create their own spaces. Just as 
how the state turns to land reclamation to overcome the lack of physical space, its people have 
done the same too on a symbolic level.
WHY RECLAIM LAND

Many of our peers have complained about how Singapore is too small – to have fun, for their ambitions – and many share dreams of migrating one day. We were curious as to why this has become so rampant. Is the limitation of this city physical or mental?

We looked around and, guided by the academic text, realised that this city was not merely built in the image of the planning authorities. Though small, ordinary people also found their own ways of living in this city. It was this awareness and optimism that inspired us to take on this project as we hope to make others realise that it does not take a lot to re-imagine this city to make it more liveable and lovable.

It is important to generate discussion on city living because it has become the default mode of living today. Recently, urban planners, architects and academics have been in dialogue on how to improve cities and Singapore has joined it by starting the World Cities Summit in 2008. Our project aims to add to this discussion by bringing out the voices of the users of a city in the context of Singapore.

PROPOSED AUDIENCE

Our project aims to create a discussion amongst the following about how they want the city they live in to be like.

Young Singaporeans
The people who inspired us to do this project. We decided to go online to better reach out to this group of Singaporeans. By providing them with an array of story-telling formats and interactivity, we hope to engage them and raise awareness of city living.

Urban planners and architects
We want to bring the grassroots’ voice to the people who design the city we live in.
To this end, we have been successful in the following:
• Sold an article to Singapore Architect, a bi-monthly magazine by the Singapore Institute of Architects that will run in Issue #249 in April (Appendix I & II).

• Multipli-City, a photo gallery, has been selected as part of the juried exhibition for the 15th International Symposium on Electronic Art (2009) in Belfast, Ireland. Held in August, the theme of the exhibition this year is on city living (Appendix III & IV).

• In discussion with the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute to present the findings of our project in May 2009. (Appendix V)

PROJECT STYLE ANALYSIS

Why we went online

While many final-year projects choose to publish books, we decided to present our project on a website instead.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A website is cheap to set up and maintain, especially since we are students and did not get any sponsorship. We only paid a total of $300 for hosting and set-up fees, but this medium allows us to reach out to a much wider audience than a book. Moreover, the open-nature of a website means we are not constrained by publishing conventions like the time it takes to print and its static nature. This had allowed us to continually refine our content to the very last day of submission, and it also means we can update and maintain content even beyond the deadline.

OPPORTUNITIES GALORE

Journalism practice today is moving beyond print and we wanted to try out this aspect.
Besides producing in traditional text form, we also presented the stories in multimedia clips and photo galleries.

Another plus in going online is that we can receive feedback and generate immediate discussion. By allowing comments on each story, we hope to be able to elicit responses from the readers to engage them in discussing the issues our stories raise.

Finally, the hyperlink nature of the web also allows for a more holistic package that would enable our readers to not only cross-reference materials within the site, but also move on to other relevant resources outside it.

Website development

LOOK AND FEEL

Going beyond just being a container for our stories, we aimed for the website to be a starting point where readers could find out more about the subject matter and engage with it. It has been divided into four main sections:

Stories

This features our seven text stories. Upon clicking on each, one could read the story, comment on it as well as be directed to related photo galleries, multimedia clips, Q&A with academics and external links.

Multimedia Gallery

The photo galleries and multimedia clips come under this section. By putting these elements independent of the text, readers would not need to go through the stories before reaching them. Being more visually appealing, these elements would also attract users to read the relevant stories even though they might not have originally planned to.
Q&A

This is where we feature expert voices and their thoughts on city planning. Here, the discussions on the topic are more in-depth.

Blog

This element allows us to keep the site fresh with just a little effort. Announcements can be posted when new stories and photos are added. By posting these updates, we could attract our readers to come back again. It also gives us an outlet to discuss and link to external materials relevant to the times.

We designed the website around the elements we had, namely text stories, photographs and multimedia clips. For this, we drew inspiration from online news sites like The New York Times (http://nytimes.com). Like it, we wanted to create a reader experience where one would be offered a variety of options to explore a story. This we did by slotting links to relevant multimedia clips and photo galleries within each article page as well as allowing reader interactivity via comment boxes and story-sharing tools (done with a simple click).

Another website we drew inspiration from was Sustainable Cities (http://sustainablecities.dk) that has addressed a related topic to ours. The site not only introduces case studies on how to make city living more sustainable but also allows users to go on and explore the rest of the content by relevant hyperlinking. We recreated this on our website too.

The visual aesthetics of the website were guided by architecture metaphors. For our logo, we went for a block-ish typeface, Genocide, and the colour palette we worked with were those associated with construction sites. The progressive beat of our stories also guided the look of the site. Inspired by GOOD magazine (2009) online (http://good.is), which discusses global issues with a progressive slant, we chose similar Web 2.0 typefaces like DIN and commissioned a set of graphics for the Q&A page. The header of the website was
conceptualised to explain our topic in a simple visual that made use of our biggest asset: photographs.

**Writing philosophy**

As we were writing for an online medium, brevity became a major issue because web audiences have a shorter attention span and usually skim through text online. We modelled our writing to the websites of International Herald Tribune (IHT) (http://www.iht.com/) and NYT, keeping it short and sharp. For one of our longer stories, *Kings of chaos*, we broke the story into two parts and presented it in a manner that reflected the playful nature of the characters. Inspired by role-playing game books like Lone Wolf, we gave our readers two choices to read a story.

Going online also meant an international audience could read our stories, and we did not want to lose this opportunity. Thus, we avoided local-centric writing, referencing various local terms that one normally would not if writing for a local newspaper like The Straits Times.

We also tried to vary the writing presentation to keep things interesting. For *A sticky situation*, we went with a first-person perspective as we felt the subject matter would strike a personal chord with many Singaporeans who share similar experiences with the author. We felt the self-referencing, or empowerment of “I”, would allow readers to appreciate the writer’s thought process and understand what it feels like to be in her shoes. This style also highlighted the writer’s involvement in the story and its characters, and allowed more leeway for the use of irony, sarcasm and wit in a story.

**Photography philosophy**

While photos should document what the story tells, we wanted photos to go beyond being slaves to text. It should provide readers, who are increasingly impatient to read long feature stories, especially online, an alternative story format that may even draw readers to read the
text. It should also document what text is not suitable for, such as in *My garden*, which documents the mini gardens that public homeowners create for themselves. Lastly, photographs should go beyond being story-telling tools to being statements on their own.

This approach was distilled into these three categories:

**ESSENTIAL PICTURES**

These are visuals that accompany text stories, or what we call traditional news pictures. They are essential to meet readers’ expectations and for the layout of the PDFs. The guiding principle was that if something was mentioned in the text, it should appear as a picture too. For this set, writers and photographer worked closely.

**COMPLEMENTARY PICTURES**

These pictures are shot in addition to essential pictures to help create the online photo galleries. A series of 10-15 pictures are presented photo-essay style just like in NYT, to provide readers an alternative story format.

**SPECIAL PICTURES**

These collections of pictures go beyond the stories and stand as individual series. Conceptual in nature, they present phenomena in non-conventional documentary photographic styles. For instance, *Multipli-City* maps the dual uses of one space, shot on two separate frames, onto a single image. *Signs of existence* documents the presence of kampung dwellers by photographing the objects they use to demarcate territories.

**PHOTOGRAPHY FORMAT**

Photographs were shot in different formats, 35mm digital format and 120mm slides (medium format), and one particular series was also given advanced digital treatment.
35mm digital format

This was mainly used for straightforward documentary and the results are the essential and complementary pictures.

120mm SLIDES (medium format)

While shooting with film in a digital age made little sense, the photographer felt it would enforce discipline in him to think harder before he made a picture. One series made this way was *Signs of existence*. The effect of it is that it should reflect a heightened sense of connection between picture and viewer because more time and thought were spent on subject choice and composition.

There is also a higher level of respectability and integrity associated with film images as readers are increasingly aware of the potential and ease of digital manipulation. This, the photographer tried to emphasise when he did not crop out the film border in certain series so that readers could see exactly what he has done.

Finally, the image quality provided by film is superior in terms of colour, depth of field and texture.

**Digital manipulation**

For *Multipli-City*, the photographer experimented with digital photo manipulation when he used the application, Adobe Photoshop, to merge two images to produce a composite. While such a practice is usually prohibited in a newsroom, we felt that this was a fresh presentation method that was effective in communicating our topic.

**Multimedia clips**

We created multimedia clips to build upon the possibilities that our web platform offers. Moreover, it largely involved mixing two media we already generated out of traditional
journalism: photographs and audio interviews. Presenting multimedia helped enhance our readers’ experience as they could see and hear for themselves, the experts and interviewees that we had engaged with. Again, the short clips were more likely to attract users when they first visit the site and possibly attract them to read the text stories.

For submission, we used the application, Final Cut Pro, to produce three videos: a project trailer, *Skater odyssey* and *Barber at the alley*, but there are plans for more.

**PROJECT TRAILER**

This introduces our topic and helps set the tone for readers visiting our website for the first time. The two-and-half minute long trailer was produced by weaving interview snippets of experts and the authority with related photographs. The narrative raises relevant questions and should pique the readers’ curiosity to explore the site. This is especially useful as a photograph or text introduction might not be the best way to convince an online audience to read our content. Moreover, the trailer is a good way to publicise the website through viral marketing like putting it up on YouTube.

**SKATER ODYSSEY**

Told through the voice of Pham, one of the skateboarders we interviewed, the video is a visual journey of their skating escapades from their home ground at Margaret Drive’s Go Sports Skate Shop to the streets of this city. The colourful nature of the characters and the sport made the content relevant for creating a multimedia clip.

**BARBER AT THE ALLEY**

This video is about the life of street barber Lee Yoon Tong, who shows how he struggles against economic forces, the weather and customers who don't pay up. As we had spent considerable time with him, we had a lot of photos and audio that would have gone to waste, thus we decided to use them to create this clip.
**Portable Document Format (PDFs)**

This option has been made available because we wanted audiences to be able to read the individual stories more closely and even share it with friends offline by printing the PDFs. Online readers often skim through stories and many would prefer to read something long only when it is printed out.

Each PDF had to stand on its own, so a blurb was also added on each to indicate this was part of a larger project and that one could go to our website to explore more or see other stories. The overall look and feel also followed the website closely, including using similar typefaces and colour scheme to create a coherent message.

Also, to make the PDFs printer-friendly, the layouts were constrained to A4-size one-pagers instead of spreads that might be aesthetically more pleasing. Still, the designer experimented with grids like news-magazines, such as those seen in TIME, as well as different paper orientations to keep each story unique.

**DIFFICULTIES & SOLUTIONS**

**Website Development**

As only one member had any experience in coding and the creation of websites, we originally considered outsourcing this to someone else. However, due to a lack of budget and the possible reduction of control over the look and feel, we decided to take it on ourselves.

**CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

We chose to work on Wordpress.org. It is a familiar blogging platform that offered us a free content management system. This was the most difficult part to implement, as we had to learn the coding language of the system well enough to architect and personalise it the way we want it to turn out. But after grasping it, everything else took off smoothly. The WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editor allows us to
post content easily, especially important for members who cannot read web coding language.

TESTS AND REFINEMENTS
As readers are likely to have different settings on their computers when accessing the website, we set aside time to do technical testing. For a week, we invited friends who are using different browsers and computers to visit a beta version of the website. Feedback was gathered, followed by trouble-shooting sessions.

*Bringing out an abstract concept*

STORY FORMULATION
As the subject matter had first came to us by way of academic text, it was always a challenge to make sure we were able to relate such an abstract concept to a more general audience. Originally, our story ideas included issues like the reclaiming of political and virtual space, but this made the topic too vast. Thus, we decided to stick to a more concrete theme and all contests for space in our stories are related to physical land space in one way or another.

STORY WRITING
As our stories were of very ordinary scenes of life in Singapore, we had to make use of descriptives to bring out the contrasts that show our subjects’ struggles. After the first drafts it was also commented that the academic voice dominated our stories so we cut them. However, to ensure that those who wanted to go in-depth, we presented some of the concepts we could not explain in our stories in the Q&A.

ACADEMIC JARGON
Due to the nature of the subject, we unwittingly used a lot of academic jargon that made the text convoluted and hard to understand. We tried to tackle this by letting our
friends who knew little about the topic to read and provide feedback on things they did not understand.

Writing for online

We were originally inspired by feature writing from Harper’s Magazine and The Atlantic Monthly that took on serious issues using first-person narratives. This method made the stories very captivating and personal. But when putting the stories online, we realised that such a long form of writing would not have gone down well with online audiences. Thus, we eventually simplified our writing.

Interviewing ordinary people

Many of our interviewees did not speak English so a lot of the interviews we conducted were in Chinese and dialect instead. Furthermore, none of us were particularly strong in these languages so we found ourselves interviewing with very simple questions. This was especially so when we were talking to foreign workers for Not such a little India as we often had to prompt or paint scenarios for our interviewees whose poor command of English made it difficult for them to express themselves. This, however, actually helped us better understand our stories because we had to paint it in simpler terms too.

Translations

Because of the non-English interviews, quotes in our stories had to be translated. We did not go for direct translations because this would have made the quotes hard to understand. They were also cleaned up to capture the essence and meaning of the interviews. As far as possible, we also allowed colourful dialect or Singlish terms to be used in the stories. However, we added parentheses to explain the origins and meanings of such references as we wanted to keep ourselves relevant to an international online audience who might browse our website.
Photography schedule

As we wanted more out of our visuals, the photographer had to take on the assignments in a holistic manner. He did not rush into shooting, but followed the writers in chasing the respective stories to get a feel for possible pictures. Only after the writers confirmed their angles did the photographer start shooting and re-shooting. The deadlines for first drafts of stories were set early to help the photographer achieve this.

Taking on multimedia journalism

All of us were new to this form of journalism but we were excited to take on something new so we could learn from it too.

TECHNICAL HANDICAP

For one, none of us were particularly trained in creating websites or multimedia clips. Whatever we knew was self-taught and inspired by trawling through award-winning multimedia pieces from competitions such as Pictures of the Year International (POYi) and College Photographer of the Year (CPOY) to understand what were required to tell a good story. This included having a conflict that people could relate to, allowing our characters to grow and incorporating environmental sounds. Eminent multimedia production website MediaStorm (http://mediastorm.org) was also used as a reference for the variety of techniques it utilises in its productions.

For the special series Multipli-City, the photographer first conceptualised the different approaches that could convey abstract spatial concepts, guided by previous works of artists and photojournalists as inspiration. These approaches required him to learn more advanced digital manipulation and techniques of shooting such as handling film, for which he consulted students from the School of Art, Design and Media. For film, he began to work predominantly with the format early in the project and also consulted WKWSCI’s technicians to understand the quirks it.
PHOTOS

Multimedia requires a large library of photographs to work on and the photographer learnt to shoot beyond what was required to form a 10 to12-picture photo essay. What used to be redundant shots could become interesting when creative editing techniques were used, such as putting together images shot at multiple frames per second to create stop-motion sequences. The photographer also had to negotiate the constraints of available audio and shoot new pictures that correspond to what were said in them. At the same time, he sketched out rough storyboards to pre-empt the shots he needed when going on shooting assignments, guided by interview questions that would be asked later. These requirements were set because multimedia storytelling is largely audio-driven.

AUDIO

We realised that interviews recorded earlier in the project were not usable for the multimedia because of distracting ambient noises and incoherent speech flow. We had to revisit all our stories again and collect interview audio in extremely quiet conditions, such as in empty restaurants. Once, we even considered conducting an interview in a car. We also modified our interview techniques to include asking several questions at once. This encouraged interviewees to speak in longer monologues that gave the video a better speech flow. They were also encouraged to speak in full sentences so that the speech would be coherent.

Example:

   Question: “How long have you been gardening?”

   Usual Answer: “About 20 over years” (Unusable)

   Encouraged Answer: “I have been gardening for about 20 over years” (Usable)
While this created extra work, it was also a good opportunity for the writers to gather new information that filled the gaps in the first drafts.

VIDEO
A multimedia video made up of only still images could become boring, such as our original edit of *Skater odyssey*. We solved the problem by including a “talking head” video interview of the narrator, Pham. Because he was not featured dominantly in the pictures, the inclusion also helped to bring him to life in the multimedia. If we had more time, we would definitely record actual video footages on top of taking pictures and collecting audio for future multimedia clips.

For *Barber at the alley*, it was unnecessary because the protagonist already had ample screen time in the images. It was also not required for the project trailer because the narrators were not important parts of the story.

MUSIC
As far as possible, we tried to use local music because we felt that it would fit with our project about Singapore. The music used for *Barber at the alley* is composed by Johnson Zhang, a Singaporean freelance songwriter. We also made efforts to use non-copyrighted music by trawling through MySpace and Creative Commons but found the music less suitable than our eventual choices for the trailer and Skater odyssey.

We e-mailed the artistes, Nick Cave, Warren Ellis, and Yann Tiersen, whose compositions *What Must be Done* and *Au-Dessous Du Volcan* were used, for permission but to date, they have not replied us. We credited them prominently on the website and remained open to negotiation with them regarding usage.
WHO WE ARE

Justin Zhuang
As the administrator of the group, he handled liaisons with the experts, the FYP supervisor as well as submissions for competitions and sponsorships. Justin also wrote two stories: Less money, more space and The gardeners’ city, and also edited the content for the website’s Q&A page. The PDFs were also designed by Shu Yun and him.

Wong Shu Yun
She was the sole architect of the website and author of three stories: Not such a Little India, Kings of chaos and Finding the faith. She was also involved in the editing of the main trailer for the website as well as the PDF design.

Sam Kang Li
The main photographer of the project, Kang Li also created the site’s multimedia content together with Serene. He edited the photo galleries, including subbing its captions.

Serene Cheong
Besides being the overall editor of the stories, Serene also wrote A sticky situation and Balek kampung. She worked together with Kang Li to create the various multimedia clips too.
## Interviewee List

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Bibliography


# Appendix

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hi Justin

your article is coming out on March 18th this month

cheers,
JKelley

-------Original Message-------
From: justin.z <justinzhuang@gmail.com>  
Subject: Reclaim Land for SA  
Sent: Mar 13 '09 06:25  

Hi Kelley,

saw that the new issue of SA #248 is out, but I didn't see my article in it. Checked back the email thread, and realised you said it is for issue #249 in March. You meant May right?

— justin.z
Dear Justin

249 should be out in March.

i am agreeable to your intentions/suggestions. let's do it!

there might be other feature stories/interviews here and there that i might need writers. if you are interested i can contact you to cover some of these, or u can also recommend me some of your friends who can write. a few of my regular contributors have left the country for work/study/marriage/etc, quite short of writers at the moment.
btw can i have your mobile number? mine is 96856511

i look forward to your submission end Jan. thank you

cheers,
Kelley

-------Original Message-------
From: j u s t i n . z <justinzhuang@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: hi
Sent: Jan 10 '09 10:15

Hi Kelley,

thanks for the opportunity! May I know when issue #249 would appear on newsstands?

The Re-claiming spaces project is a group work of about seven stories due for submission end March 2009. We intend to publish the finished content on a website by then so that people can read it.

The way I see it, the direction of my piece for SA could take a more general idea of contestation and reclaiming in the Singapore cityscape, supported with examples from some of these stories. I hope the article can also serve as an entry point to my project for SA's readers. We will provide photos, but they would eventually appear on our website too.

If all this is okay with you, then I'll be more than happy to work something out for you by end Jan.

— justin.z

On 09 Jan 2009, at 6:08 PM, <[LINK: mailto:kelley@nightandday.sg]kelley@nightandday.sg> wrote:

Dear Justin

thank you for the links. i enjoy reading them very much. Your pieces based on your observations on the urban landscape will be especially relevant for SA. i will be most happy if you could do a regular contribution to SA if you have the time. If you could expand of the piece on Re-claiming public spaces, we could start with that. i love the images as well - raw but nice and serves to illustrate the piece very well.

for SA, it is preferred that the writing style be less about "personal sentiments" but more facts/opinions driven. of cos you dont need to completely cut out the personal bits, but just less that's all.
we pay an honorarium of SS$200/article for 1000-1500 words and an extra SS$100 if you can furnish us with the images.

if this works for you, we can start with SA249, the deadline is end of Jan09.

i look forward to hear from you

best regards,
Kelley

-------Original Message-------
From: justin.z <mailto:justinzhuang@gmail.com>
justinzhuang@gmail.com
Subject: Re: hi
Sent: Dec 26 '08 14:49

Hi,

yes, I do write and I would be interested to contribute if possible.

In fact, I am currently working on my final-year project, a journalism piece on city planning in Singapore. You can find out a bit more at my group's working blog. [LINK: http://reclaimland.wordpress.com]

I do not have writing specifically on design as of yet, but over the years I have written quite a bit of opinion pieces for the NTU newspaper, The Nanyang Chronicle. I'm still uploading them, but a sample of the pieces can be found here:

The most recent piece I've written is for this new online student newspaper, The Enquirer:

I would appreciate any feedback or comments!

— justin.z

On 24 Dec 2008, at 1:46 PM, <mailto:kelley@nightandday.sg>
kelley@nightandday.sg> wrote:

do u write? u are welcome to contribute to both my magazines!
if you like, u can send me a few writing samples and i'll take a look.
thank you and have a merry X'mas!

cheers,
Kelley

-------Original Message-------
From: justin.z <mailto:justinzhuang@gmail.com>
[Link: mailto:justinzhuang@gmail.com]
justinzhuang@gmail.com
Subject: Re: hi
Sent: Dec 21 '08 10:27

Hi Kelley,

what a surprise to hear from you, it's just something I really wanted to
share with my friends. Plus, I think very few people actually discuss
design in the Singapore context.

I'm glad to see local designers create good publication design, and
hopefully I'll be part of it one day in one way or another.

Keep up the good work and I'll look out for more from you guys!

— justin.z
Reclaim Land
The fight for space in the little red dot

TEXT BY JUSTIN ZHUANG
PHOTOS BY SAM KANG LI

At just over 700 square kilometres, the small size of Singapore has been one of its biggest challenges. Land is so scarce a commodity that every inch of it must come under the ideological makeover of the city-state’s urban planners, so much so that architect Rem Koolhaas once described it as such in his book S,M,L,XL:

"It is pure intention: If there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity."

This desire of our urban planners to fashion by sheer will a First World city after others like New York and London have led to the relentless pursuit of urban renewal and countless grandiose master plans. The Garden City, public housing, a hub for business, education and healthcare… it is easy to fall into the belief that we, the people, are nothing more but a population detail in this city’s plans.

Yet, as minor as details are, it is the people who make up a city. And when we look at the individuals around us, as Michel de Certeau did in The Practice of Everyday Life, we start to see how this city is not simply a product of its planners. Just like how the state has turned to land reclamation to overcome the lack of space, its people have done the same, creating their own spaces in this over-determined red dot.

SURVIVING IN THE SMALL SPACES
With just a mirror on the back of a grey shophouse, a maroon leather chair from his old salon and a large green canvas sheet that shields both from the afternoon sun and the gaze of the modern skyscrapers towering over, Mr Lee Yoon Tong has set up his barber salon at this back alley on the fringes of the city’s financial district for the last seven years.

No larger than two motorcycle parking lots, his salon is hidden amidst a neighbourhood of shophouses at Tanjong Pagar occupied today by design agencies, investment firms and posh restaurants -- businesses that can afford the high rent that had led Lee to be evicted from a similar shophouse around the corner.

But the move out to the streets was a blessing in disguise. Lee’s earnings have dropped, but his costs have fallen even more -- no utilities, no taxes and most importantly, no rent. Ironically, while the subsequent tenants of his former shophouse have changed hands several times since he left, Lee’s salon has survived.

This is in spite the public’s view that street hawkers like Lee are unsightly and an obstruction for a modern city, and are too small to survive in an economy dominated by global corporations. Thus, while street hawking was a way of life in the past, they have become a rare sight today due to strict regulation on where, when and what they can sell.

Yet, it is precisely by being small that they have continued as a means for people with little capital to make a living, especially in these tough economic times. To a street hawker, walkways, shop fronts, back alleys -- spaces too insignificant for landowners to rent out -- is all they need for their table of wares, be it a cobbler, newspaper vendor or ice-cream seller.

Thus, street hawking is a great way to nurture entrepreneurship, “It is not because people don’t have ideas,” says urban studies professor Ho Kon Chong “but because the cost of land is too expensive, the rent does not allow for failure.”
However, Lee's insistence on staying near his old salon is not just a matter of economics. "I wanted to serve my old customers, they still look for me," the 70-year-old said in Mandarin. In this city that often limits the diversity of land use by thinking only of its economic returns, we forget that a shop space is also a container for memories.

ALLOWING PEOPLE TO GROW A PLACE

It was the persistent memories of their kampong near Sixth Avenue that led a group of old folks to this once-empty plot of land in Clementi. Bounded by the winding Malaysian railway track, a bustling expressway and shielded by the neat rows of HDB flats, Kampong Sungai Pandan is a fragmented collection of farm plots scattered with fruit trees like papayas and sugar canes, and a makeshift hut that is the central meeting point for the community.

But this is not a nostalgic reproduction of their lost kampong in a highly built Singapore, no one stays here, rather, an organic development of a community place for this group who were resettled to the surrounding flats in the 1980s. In a way, the community is fortunate that the land they have claimed sits in the middle of an on-going dispute between the Singapore government and the Malaysian railway. This has allowed them to ride on the ambivalence of either side, until they decided to make their presence more permanent.

Pooling together money, Mr Cai and rest of the community had built a comfortable gathering spot with carpet grass, potted plants, stone furniture and even a zinc-roof hut. It was not long after that the state came by and tore down the unauthorised structure over fears of mosquito breeding and suspicions of illegal activities like gambling. Today, the carpet grass has again given way to mimosa and weeds, and a canvas sheet shields them in place of the zinc roof as the community, uncertain of its place, have chosen to let the place stay dilapidated instead. It will be less painful when they are eventually chased out.

Such conditions are not only ideal for breeding mosquitoes and pests, often the authorities' biggest concern, but it aids the growth of apathy amongst residents. Denied from taking ownership over spaces such as common corridors and void decks, residents use but not care for them.

This lack of participation is a major problem in our residential dwellings says Professor Ooi Giok Ling, who has written about the management of such spaces in *The Future Of Space*. "We need to work out how we are going to manage as a group all this shared property, all this communal work. But because we never get the opportunity to, we just lift a phone and call (the authorities)."

The culture of dependency on the state to solve our problems is why our spaces are so dominated by their imagination rather than the people who use it. Thus, one can hardly tell the difference between living in Jurong or Pasir Ris because the same housing plans are repeated with little input from the residents.

And in an age where it is so easy to move from one city to another, what will differentiate this place from the rest? Only by allowing people to participate, to build their own environments, can they be rooted to this land. After all, how can one make a home in a place where homes are already planned for you?

THIS CITY IS POSSIBLE

As skater Lee De Ming aka King Ming says, "What you can find in the park, you can find in the streets, but what you can find in the streets, you can't find in a park." This is why Lee and his group of skaters still enjoy the thrill of taking on the city despite the skate parks built to house a sport seen as a nuisance to many.

Aided by the cover of the night, the twenty skaters leave their day “home” at the atrium of a block of ageing HDB flats at Margaret Drive in search of “liquid waves” in the city’s architecture. Skateboarding is after all based on the Californian surfing culture of the 1950s that wanted to extend the sport to the urban environment by adding wheels to a surfboard.

It is almost midnight when they finally find the spot -- "Four Stairs". In the skater’s eyes, a flight of four steps, each 30 centimetres tall, at the deserted corner of Golden Landmark Hotel becomes their
performance stage as the skater’s cheers and jeers transforms the place into their home, a stadium of energy, if only for a while.

It is these skaters’ sense of possibility with just a little imagination that could actually inspire a city that plans to house more than the existing 4.8 million already living here. Even Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has his doubts. “I have not quite been sold on the idea that we should have 6.5 million,” he said last year when he discussed Singapore’s population projections by 2030.

Moreover, it is not just a lack of space, but also the right kind of space. And it becomes a massive problem for urban planners when one realises that people have a million uses of spaces, so how can any master plan meet all the diverse needs of its growing population? The street hawker, the elderly community and the skaters have shown how this city is possible for them when the state allows them to participate and decide how to use the space.

It is in their act of reclaiming space that we transcend the limitations of a small city so tightly regulated by the state, and re-imagine a new geography of Singapore, one of our own, one that gives birth to the question: Whose city is it anyway?

(1,554 words)

This article is based on a journalism project, Reclaim Land, by four final-year students at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information. To find out more, read other stories or see more photos, please go to http://reclaimland.sg
Submission 452

Dear Justin Zhuang

Re: ISEA2009, the 15th International Symposium on Electronic Art (2009)

The International Programming Committee, the independent curator and Artistic Director of ISEA2009, the 15th International Symposium on Electronic Art (2009) have now deeply examined your proposal and the additional work submitted to the shortlist for creative projects to be hosted, exhibited and/or showcased and I am pleased to inform you that your proposal has been successful. We would like to feature your work in the juried exhibition. And we can stay in contact over the coming weeks to talk about the details.

The ISEA2009 conference juried exhibitions and associated events will take place across Northern Ireland in Belfast (Waterfront Hall in Belfast from 26th to 29th of August 2009), Derry, Coleraine and Portadown with further events in Dublin and Dundalk from 23 August to 1st of September. The main juried exhibitions will open on the 7th of August in Belfast.

The main juried exhibition will take place across three major venues. The Ormeau Baths Gallery and the Golden Thread Gallery both leading contemporary art spaces in Northern Ireland and the UUA the new building of the University of Ulster Art School.

Spark was developed to provide within ISEA2009 an informal and immediate platform for the showcasing and discussion of the best work in creative technology production from wearable technology innovations to examples of exemplary devices that respond and translate the workings of the human body. It will be located in the heart of ISEA2009 conference in the main exhibition areas of the Waterfront Hall. This is the primary location in Belfast for the conference, major events and networking forums. This will run only for the duration of the conference itself.

I would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt of this letter and confirm that you will verify your commitment to participate in ISEA2009.

I look forward to working with you on this exciting event. Please contact me at: Dr Cherie Driver at c.driver@ulster.ac.uk if you have any further queries.

I deal with a high volume of email traffic, so if you ever have a really urgent matter you need me to deal with but I haven't been able to get to your written request, please call me. Please note my mobile number below.

With best wishes,

Dr Cherie Driver

Research Associate
On behalf of the ISEA2009

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Organising Committee ISEA2009
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Reclaim Land
A photo exhibition on the fight for space in Singapore
by Justin Zhuang, Wong Shu Yun, Serene Cheong and Sam Kang Li

DETAILS OF PROJECT
This is a journalism work by four final-year undergraduates at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information in Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). Through a series of stories and photos, this project will look at the contest for space put up by ordinary Singaporeans in a highly planned city-state whose biggest problem is being small. Through their acts of “reclaiming land”, the characters in our stories weave a tale of how it is possible to re-imagine this city they call home.

The project, due to be completed in early April 2009 will then be available for viewing at http://reclaimland.sg where one can read the stories, view photos and watch multimedia slideshows of these characters. There will also be links to relevant resources and views from local experts that readers can use to understand how the city is planned and creative ways to get around it.

EXHIBITION PROPOSAL
For ISEA2009, we would like to showcase the centrepiece of our photographs -- a double-exposure series that explores how ordinary Singaporeans “reclaim land”. By compositing two digital photographs of the same location, but taken at different times, this series compresses times onto one photograph to show how an environment is transformed when “reclamation” occurs. This will be the first-time ever that the photos will be exhibited. We have attached two examples of what the photos will look like but the full set will only be ready end-March 2009.

PROPOSED TECHNICAL DETAILS
• 10 to 12 photographs with captions
• Each photograph is A1 in size
• Accompanying poster of write-up about project
• Two computer terminals permanently linked to our website http://reclaimland.sg (optional)

We would like to display the exhibition in an open public space, in the same “reclaiming space” spirit as the characters of our project. Thus, it is preferable that this public space is not normally used as exhibition ground, but is really an excellent choice for such a purpose (e.g. spacious, well lit, allows good human flow, not exclusive only for the higher class etc.) The rationale for this exhibiting location can easily be crafted into our introduction statement. It will be extremely beneficial if we can work with ISEA to select a suitable location, pardon our limited knowledge of Ireland.

MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES
We do not need to be around to install the works as we are looking only at a simple exhibition of the photos with captions. As we are based overseas in Singapore we are wondering if funds will be provided for shipping the photos to ISEA or can we send high-resolution digital copies of the photos and ISEA will handle the rest.
Thanks!

I will send you the photos in a few days. It will be better to upload them after your assessment. Thanks also for agreeing to share your work with ARI. I will be in touch later regarding this. We hope to have it on a Tuesday in May. Hope this is fine with you.

Parthasarathy

-----Original Message-----
From: justin.z [mailto:justinzhuang@gmail.com]
Sent: Friday, March 13, 2009 12:21 AM
To: Devanathan Parthasarathy
Subject: Re: Update on Reclaim Land

Hi Prof,

if you haven't got an e-mail from Yousendit, here's the link to download the recording https://www.yousendit.com/download/U0d6a3NVQXArV3p2WmCDdS

It will be up for download for 7 days.

May I suggest you do the same with your photos, zip the photos and upload them at http://yousendit.com, and direct them to my e-mail. It's a free service.

We would like to hold back from putting up your photos until after our project assessment in early April so that we will not confuse our lecturers. I hope you understand where we are coming from.

Finally, we would be glad to share our project at ARI. Perhaps you want to wait till after our official launch date on March 24th to see the website before we discuss how we want to proceed with this.

Thank you once again!

Regards,
Justin Zhuang

On 12 Mar 2009, at 5:16 PM, Devanathan Parthasarathy wrote:

Thanks. Please let me have the download link for the recording. Regarding the photographs, how many can you put up? I have selected around 15, but the total size is too large to send by email. Can I upload it somewhere for you to download? I am more interested in events such as Thai Pusam, Chinese New Year, and Chingay Parada, and I wish to send photos of hawkers with and without permits who take advantage of these events to set up temporary stalls. I have looked at other issues as well, but they may not be relevant to your project.

I also wish to know if the four of you would be interested in making a presentation of your project here at ARI. I can introduce your project and also give a short talk linking some of my work and then you can present based on your project. We can have this sometime in May or June.

Thanks

-----Original Message-----
From: justin.z [mailto:justinzhuang@gmail.com]
Sent: Tuesday, March 03, 2009 12:07 PM
To: Devanathan Parthasarathy
Subject: Re: Update on Reclaim Land

Dear Prof,

I do not have a full transcript, just a (very) partial one. Alternatively, I can give you a download link for the recording.

Thanks for your offer on the photographs. Why don't you send it to us and maybe we can include it as part of the interview excerpt and credit you for the photographs.

Thanks again!

Regards,
Justin Zhuang

On 02 Mar 2009, at 1:51 PM, Devanathan Parthasarathy wrote:

Dear Justin,

Thanks for your mail. I was away in Bangkok and so couldn't respond earlier. You may go ahead with the interview excerpt. If you have transcribed the entire interview, I would appreciate a copy.
I am glad to know that your work is almost complete and that you plan to launch your website soon. I have some photographs which may be appropriate for the website. Would you like to put up some of them? Perhaps a few on 'reclaiming land' during the Formula 1 race?

best

Parthasarathy

-----Original Message-----
From: justin.2 [mailto:justinhuang@gmail.com]
Sent: Wednesday, February 25, 2009 3:36 PM
To: Devanathan Parthasarathy
Subject: Update on Reclaim Land

Dear Prof Parthasarathy,

I hope you are doing fine. Our project, Reclaim Land, is due to be completed by March 24th when we will launch our website to the public.

After going through our content, we decided that there was a lot more to share besides our stories, thus we plan to also have a page on our website to host views from experts like yourself about spatial planning in Singapore. We want to present an excerpt of the interview we had with you in a Q&A format and I have attached the file for you.

We have tried to keep the content as close as possible to what you said to us, only editing for clarity and length. We hope you can spend some time to look through it to make sure we have not put your words out of context. If you have any objections or suggestions, please feel free to write back to me, preferably before the end of this week, and we'll work something out. If not, this will go up to the site as it is.

Thank you very much for your help again.