Palimpsest-Here, Now

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Question 4: Architecture and Utopia
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Introduction:

Rem Koolhaas, in his study of the architectural realm in Singapore, laments the observable "apotheosis of the tabula rasa: the razed plane as the basis for a genuinely new beginning."[1] In other terms, he finds fault in the state's tendency to "displace, destroy and replace" with remarkable speed such that erasures of history, culture and the likes are the only aspects that are consistent.[2]

Palimpsest, on the other hand, while refers to a similar idea of eradication of the old it explores the possibility of the old resurfacing. In that regard, this paper, firstly, seeks to demonstrate that Singapore is characterized more by palimpsest than it is by tabula rasa for even in the face of erasures, cultures, history and ideas are not always completely lost and do tend to resurface. By drawing this distinction it will demonstrate the importance of these nuances to the analysis of socio-cultual-political-spatial implications of the pursuit of the utopia.

The context of architecture and utopia:

Utopia, according to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, refers to all that is ideal in terms of laws, governance and social conditions. An important point of departure, for the establishment of utopia, is the "city's function as a spatial setting for the projection of ideal society and as an instrument that helps serve this end." [3] In other terms, existing problems pertaining to space within a city have to first be dealt with and space has to be "organized, regulated and managed" as part of the process of aspiration

[1] Rem Koolhaas, ed., *Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potenkim Metropolis…or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa* in SMLXL (New York: Monecelli Press, 1995) p.1031
[2] Ibid.,p.1035
[3] Ray Hutchinson, "Utopia," in *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, 2009 ed.

towards all that is utopian.[4] The crux of this idea is that "before all other aspects of its administration can be successfully adhered to a community has to exist in utopia's physical space and manifestation first."[5] It is blatant that the Singaporean government subscribed to this principal for in the immediate post-independence years the governments pursued spatial and architectural issues more vehemently than other issues. A review of the state's policies in the past demonstrates that "urban land use and transportation were coordinated in a concerted effort to establish the ultimate degree of spatial and social order through the establishment of planned neighbourhoods and efficient infrastructure." [6]Although such developments seem typical of any city that aspires to modernize, Koolhaas points out that Singapore started off with rapidity unmatched elsewhere and despite the achievements in modernization the state continues with a relentless rapidity. Furthermore, Koolhaas also emphasizes that the state's interest in such rapid development necessitates the constant eradication of historical and cultural elements that might impede the desired speed of change. By virtue of such eradication, he argues, there are noteworthy socio-political-cultural-spatial consequences.

Social Implications of Utopian Pursuits

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[4] Serene Lai Kuan Lim, "Deconstructing utopia: understanding the political in public space" (Honours, diss., National University of Singapore, 2002)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Brian J. Shaw and Roy Jones," Palimpsests of Progress: Erasing the Past and Rewriting the Future in Developing Societies: Case Studies of Singapore and Jakarta," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 122-138

Koolhaas argues that by virtue of the tabula rasa approach-demolition of shophouses, kampongs and ethnic enclaves to make way for new, generic HDB buildings the social aspects of society have also eroded to a large extent. This view is manifest in his claim that "new inhabitants, cut off from connective networks of family relationships, tradition, habits, are abruptly forced into another civilization: the slab as time machine." [7] This critical take on the rehousing policies demonstrates the conflict between an individual's past lifestyle within a kampong setting and the need for him to reconstruct his identity and lifestyle within the modern setting of a HDB in a new town. He is abruptly extracted from the familiarity of surroundings consisting of social interaction with clan members, navigation within an extensive space and communal qualities.

However, contrary to Koolhaas' argument, which does not acknowledge the finer aspects of the HDB and the new town, such an individual does not necessarily lose a part of himself and his social identity. Rather, he could potentially renegotiate his relationship within the HDB surroundings. The manner in which many of these individuals have encountered the space within HDB and utilized it within their own ideological framework goes against the intended architectural precepts. Nevertheless, therein is the type of dynamism that they have carried with them to the new space from the old. For instance, void decks, coffee shops and common corridors are some of the salient features within the HDB flat typology that inhabitants have appropriated and used in very unique ways. Chua Beng Huat points out that "..the kopi-tiam, (is) a revered quintessential kampung institution." Therefore by using the coffee houses as a hangout avenue within the neighbourhood inhabitants reinvigorate the kampong spirit.

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[7] Koolhaas, 1021

Another, quintessential form of appropriation is manifest in the particularity of Malay weddings that are held at void decks. Within the context of a kampong, open spaces were converted into function halls for Malay weddings[8] and it was a celebratory affair to which the entire kampong was invited. The fact that this practice is upheld even within the HDB context and that decorative publicity materials for the wedding are usually placed around the neighbourhood where the wedding is taking place demonstrates the idea of the old traditions reemerging even within a modern context. Therefore, it is notable that Singapore is characterized more by palimpsest than tabula rasa.

Cultural Implications of Utopian Pursuits:

"Cultural identity emerges as a complex field of operations that engages with-but is not defined by-cultural artefacts such as architecture." [9] Architecture, therefore, could be said to have input in the production of cultural identity. However, according to Koolhaas, in the case of Singapore, cultural identity has long been compromised because of the pursuit of the utopian. For one, during the early stages of architectural planning there was not much concern about cultural and visual identity as there was about pragmatism[10]. In face of pursuit of the utopia, and the transient quality and constant metamorphosis of the urban landscape a rooted cultural identity has proven to be hard to achieve but, contrary to what Koolhaas suggests, it is not impossible to achieve.

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[8] Eunice Seng, home-e-scape[s]: tabula rasa, or a denial of a Singaporean contemporaneity (accessed October 6, 2013); available from http://www.academia.edu/895350/hom-e-scape_s_tabula_rasa_or_a_denial_of_a_Singaporean_contemporaneity#

[9] William Siew Wai Lim, *Architecture, art, identity in Singapore: is there life after tabula rasa?*, (Singapore: Asian Urban Lab, 2004), 235.
[10] Ibid., 247

Toponomy

Even in the face of demolition and landscape overhaul, an inquiry into Singapore's toponymy reveals that street names have played a fundamental role in maintaining the cultural integrity of a place. Street names are an "integral part of place meanings... (for they) recall (a place's) history, and ultimately contribute to people's engagement with their own heritage in the everyday landscape." [11] Within the context of Singapore, "there are traditional names to be respected and new ones to be coined, but everything has to achieve a delicate balance to maintain social harmony and reflect history." [12] Street names in Singapore open a door into Singapore's past comprising of, among other things, the experience of living under the British colonial rule, dealing with a Japanese presence in Singapore and even the trends of migration. These aspects of the past are reflected meaningfully in the street naming policies. The area encompassing City Hall and the vicinity is named in a manner that invokes the Colonial rule. For instance, Victoria Street was named after Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom and Waterloo Street which was built in 1837 was named as such in honour of the British victory at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. [13] Simultaneously, one will be able to find street names such as "Chitty road," which serve to emphasize the migrant nature of the population in Singapore. "Chitty" is a term used to refer to the Peranakan Indians who migrated from Malacca to Singapore in the late 19th century. These "Chitty" communities

[11] Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Lily Kong, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Construction of "nation,"* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 128.
[12] *A Note on My Role in the Singapore Street Naming Committee* (accessed October 31, 2013); available from http://rubanisation.org
[12] Old, *Common Names of Places in Singapore, and their Origins* (accessed October 28, 2013); available from http://remembersingapore.wordpress.com

often settled in the vicinity of Little India and had the tendency to engage in merchant trade on top of other things. The adoption of this name, with its ethnic particularity, has served to emphasize the historic quality of an area that has somewhat lost its distinctiveness because of the generic typology of architecture in Singapore. Therein, lies proof that, contrary to Koolhaas' claims, the practice of demolishing and building has not completely wiped out the cultural aspects of places but these aspects are always featured in unique ways such as, in this case, in the form of street names.

Conservation Efforts: A Case Study

Furthermore, the government's ongoing efforts to conserve more rather than displace and destroy are a step forward in the direction of recovering history and cultural artefacts. In 1986, the Singapore Heritage Society, a non-profit organization, was set up and it "dedicated (itself) to the preservation, transmission and promotion of Singapore's history, heritage and identity."[14] A few years later, in 1989, the Planning Act was amended and a Conservation Master Plan for Singapore was introduced. [15] Both instances, demonstrate that both the authorities and the public empathize with the value of heritage manifest in architectural typologies and existing landscapes and therefore make a cohesive commitment to the preservation of these. The Tanjong Pagar conservation story is one of many examples of entire areas that have been chosen to be conserved.

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[14] *About Us* (accessed November 1, 2013); available from http://www.singaporeheritage.org
[15] *Strengthening Urban Heritage in Singapore: Building Economic Competitiveness and Civic Identity* (accessed November 1, 2013); available from http://www.globalurban.org
[15] Patrick Lau, "The Conservation of Tanjong Pagar: Public Attitudes and State Policies" (Honours diss., National University of Singapore, 1992/1993)

Conservation efforts in the Tanjong Pagar area offer some interesting insights into the nature of conservation efforts in Singapore and how such conservation efforts debunk Koolhaas' claims that Singapore is a tabula rasa; a blank slate without any cultural value. Noteworthy is the fact that the shophouses and other buildings within this locale were once slated to be demolished. However, conservation and adaptive reuse of this entire area was seen as the means to an end; the intended outcome being the retainment of cultural and traditional values. [16] Eventually, a series of shophouses such as those at No. 9 Neil Road, Eng Aun Tong factory building, Ee Ho Hean club, just to name a few, were successfully preserved. Many saw this conservation of an entire area as being meaningful in that buildings were not conserved out of context in a detached manner as was the case before.

Nevertheless, many others echoed very different sentiments; discontent arose from what people deemed the superficial mode of conservation that still permitted the infiltration of modern elements into an area supposedly being conserved. These people deemed that the mere maintenance of facades was not sufficient in the realm where pre-existing social and community features were lost to modernity and economic priorities. This is quite the sort of sentiment reflected in Koolhas' commentary as well. However, it is notable that such "fossilization of buildings and culture," [17]is the unattainable ideal and the lack of orientation towards that particular extreme does not signify an absolute dismissal of the importance of cultural heritage as it is supposed by critics. Rather, even the conservation of the exterior of these buildings and shophouses and the continued

[17] Patrick Lau

existence of a nominal number of features indicative of the past such as, in this case, a clan association and Faith Methodist Girls suffice in qualifying Singapore as a palimpsest rather than a tabula rasa in the very sense that these facades are reminiscent elements that provide connectivity with the past.

Spatial Implications of a Utopian Pursuit:

In the course of utopian idealism, there is a tendency to manipulate public spaces; all public space is free to be appropriated by the one in possession of power and it is an important medium, as discussed earlier, for the creation of utopia. "Utopian plans are first undertaken by seizing the organization of public space and designating it as a physical site." [18] This idea if further reinforced in Koolhaas' assertions pertaining to Singapore that demonstrate how the government freely appropriates space only to eradicate the meaning and value behind it in the course of creating a utopia. Furthermore, Koolhaas is sensitive to the concept of space in Singapore being impersonal and a tabula rasa that the people have long been detached from. There are the sprawling malls, commercial hubs and the likes that have replaced cemetries, shophouses and "kampungs." Despite the elites' stringent attempts to maintain monopoly over space there always remain "liminal spaces where marginalised communities have gained a foothold for their own purposes."[19] They have found avenues within a regimented landscape for "insurgent spatial practices."[20] Insurgent spatial practice refers to the mode of city-making that is different from conventional notions of urban design and master planning. The insurgent

[18] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Wiley Blackwell,1991), 30.
[19] *Landscapes and the Diversity of Meaning In A Global City* (accessed October 6, 2013); available from http://www.lucasjodogne.net/BD_IN2.HTM
[20] Jeffrey Hou, ed., *Insurgent Public Space: Guerilla urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities* (USA: Routledge, 2010) 13

spatial practices reveal the ability of citizen groups and individuals to play a distinctive role in shaping the contemporary urban environment in defiance of the official rules and regulations.[21] These "pockets of face-to-face communities" often comprise of migrant workers seeking momentary respite from the foreignness of the society and landscape they are a part of by redefining these spaces to become familiar. For instance, the more discreet space appropriation acts include the conversion of open fields to a hairdressers and cricket venues. The more blatant examples can be found in ethnic enclaves such as Little India and Lucky Plaza which is also called "Little Manila." [22] As Professor Brenda Yeoh puts it, an air of the carnivalesque prevails as Lucky Plaza and its environs are transformed to something akin to a Filipino festive ground.[23] These entrenched practices of migrant workers certainly disprove Koolhaas' claims about the space in Singapore being a tabula rasa even as they demonstrate the ways in which the space is imbued with meaning as people desire as opposed to being a hollow space. In contrast, these migrant workers, provide a good case for the understanding of Singapore as palimpsest for their space appropriation tendencies reflect that of earlier migrants in Singapore. It is worth considering if ethnic enclaves such as Little India, Chinatown and the likes which were originally created for the regulated settlement of migrants would lost their essence and be meaningless if not for the recurring presence of migrant affairs and activities there.

Tabula Rasa or Palimpsest?

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[21] Ibid., 15

[22] *Landscapes and the Diversity of Meaning in a Global City* (accessed October 14, 2013); available from http://www.lucasjodogne.net/BD_IN2.HTM

[23] Ibid.

In conclusion, it is evident that Koolhaas emphasizes the trend of elimination of the old in favour of the new that has guided the urban policy makers in Singapore for a long time now. In elucidating this trend, Koolhaas emphasizes that the transient nature of the physical landscape in turn implicates the socio-cultural-spatial landscape of the country. Essentially, as a third party observer of the state's development over time it seems very justified that ultimately he would arrive at the conclusion that Singapore is nothing but a blank state given the culmination of all the aforementioned; thus the label tabula rasa. However, when one delves deeper and pays attention to the nascent features of the state's development process it becomes well evident that while there have been erasures, there has not been a complete eradication of the cultural and social heritage of Singapore. When the opportune moments are there, these elements of the past and pertaining to the country's cultural and social heritage always resurface. This re-emergent possibilities allows one to qualify Singapore as the palimpsest state.
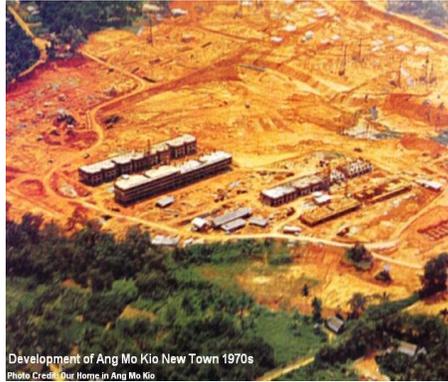
Appendix:

From Kampungs to New Towns-
Ang Mo Kio

Left: Old Kampung Area in Ang Mo Kio
Right: Development of Ang Mo Kio New Town 1970s
Source: www.remembersingapore.wordpress.com

Renegotiating Space

Left: Malay wedding held at the void deck
Right: Coffee shops at void decks
Source: Author's Picture (Left)
www.the-inncrowd.com (Right)

Appendix

Tanjong Pagar Conservation

Left: Jinrikisha Station
Right: Ee Ho Hean Club, Millionaire's club dating 1895
Source: www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com

Tanjong Pagar Conservation

Left: Baba House at 157 Neil Road
Right: No. 9 Neil Road, The very first conservation shophouse
Source: www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com

Insurgent Spatial Practice

Left: Migrant workers convert open space into a hairdresser
Right: Migrant crowd at Lucky Plaza
Source: www.asianurbaneipcentres.com (Left)
          www.storiesontravel.com (Right)

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