singapore design studios

exporting education

Andrea Mina

Exporting Education?

In 1996 Interior Design at RMIT[1] entered into a partnership agreement with LaSalle/SIA College of the Arts in Singapore, which offered the School of Architecture and Design at RMIT the opportunity to geographically locate itself within South East Asia in collaboration with an established and respected Arts school.

This agreement stipulated that we were to provide and co-deliver the final two years of our degree program at the LaSalle/SIA campus in Singapore. Graduates from the program would be awarded an RMIT Bachelor of Arts (Interior Design) degree. That virtual space of the agreement that is prefigured and described through its text has come into being. We are now in our third year of delivery of the program and have witnessed the second group of graduates hold their successful INDEX.S 98 exhibition at the Substation, Singapore, in October 1998. The contract text could never have prepared us for the spaces that we
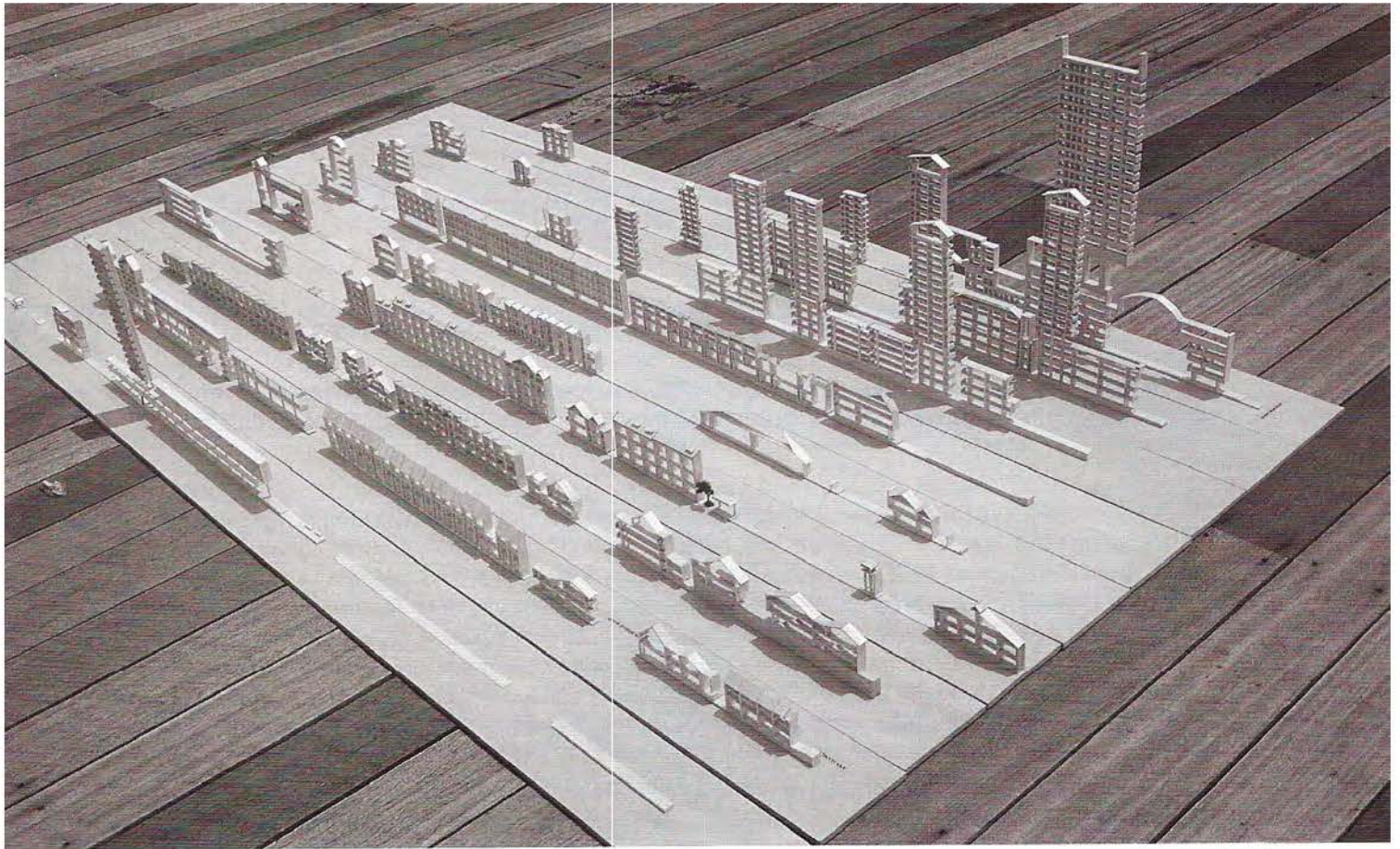
Student work from 'Singapore Slice'

now occupy, as these are transforming with equal speed and fluidity to that for which Singapore—and its exponential growth over the last 33 years—is famous for. The effects of culture and context are insidious and profound.

Our first reaction to the idea of exporting the course was one of bewilderment. We pondered whether if this was all that was necessary to satisfy the demand for participation in 'off-shore program deliveries', could not a more exotic and 'liberated' destination be found? Koolhaus' Singapore contribution in *S,M,L,XL* further blunted our perceptions, yet our curiosities were simultaneously stirred through his use of Singapore as subject material.

We discussed notions of 'colonial imperialism' in the context of education-as-business, wrestling with the ethics of exporting an Euro-centric way of seeing and interpreting the world. The discussions embraced concerns of 'centre' versus 'periphery' and made clear the irony of Melbourne being considered as 'cen-

tre' when it is one of the most far-flung geographic locations in the world. We determined that the priority would be education in favour of business, and yet reluctantly acknowledged that in the present climate of fiscal dominance in education, the success of this venture would ultimately be predicated on its financial viability.

LaSalle/SIA College have provided an exciting and dynamic 'arts school' context, replete with the most modern infra-structure and equipment ranging from advanced computers and software to a casting foundry, painting, sculpture and dance studios, lecture theatres and the Dr. Earl Lu and LaSalle/SIA galleries. The College is an oasis in the Singapore landscape of regulation, corporate efficiency and conspicuous consumption. To this we have added an accelerated 18-month program designed to accommodate students articulating into the degree program from their one-year foundation studies and two-year LaSalle Interior Design diploma.

We have introduced a pedagogy based on the Melbourne model of guided, self-motivated exploration and research/inquiry, which is manifest through the studio project. The design studio is the core and focus of the program and as such is underpinned by supporting technical studies, history/theory and communications subjects that have been designed to augment the studio work. Verbal presentations, discussions and critique of the studio work form the essence of the program. It is in this climate of intense questioning and debate that deep personal discoveries are made. Assessments are made to panels made up from the teaching staff and invited members from industry and the professions[2]. The diverse range of subjects offered by LaSalle through its schools of Visual and Performing Arts have provided a choice of compatible elective subjects, ranging from advanced computing applications to design for performance. This opportunity has been exploited to provide students with real experiences of cross-disciplinary collaborations.

2. Peer review is an essential component of the program.

The work, together with all other outcomes, is re-visited, edited and compiled in a portfolio. The portfolio not only provides the student with a record of their performance but is also a valuable pedagogical tool that assists with the development of both critical and communication faculties. Reflection is as vital a component in the educative process as is action. Public exhibition of the work is demonstrative of this and forms an integral component of the program. Exhibition is not only about making publicly visible that which has been produced and thus attracting comment and criticism, but also about self-reflection/self-criticism through the editing and curating processes that pre-figure that which is to be made public. Students are encouraged to dignify the outcomes of their efforts through public exhibitions and to generously share this with a community that extends well beyond the classroom. These exhibitions are the essence of the program as they provide moments where rhetoric is lain aside and actions are

3. INDEX.s '97,
INDEX.s '98,
Artifice Park

measured by real outcomes. These relaxed and informal moments allow for breaches of etiquette, encouraging intimacies that would otherwise not exist. Conversations form easily, barriers drop, friendships are made and networks established and extended. Catalogues[3] are published to capture this knowledge and provide records of these exhibitions; a complementary gesture to the ephemeral quality of these events.

Inducing a climate of rigorous academic and intellectual inquiry has proved to be far more challenging. It is at this level that we are confronted by the fundamental difference between teaching in Melbourne compared to Singapore. In Melbourne, students take as given that nothing is sacred and that everything will come under scrutiny through questioning. It is through this process of questioning that students develop similar practices of inquiry and analysis. The expectation is that the content of their work will improve accordingly. Singaporean students have to contend with Confucian sensibilities that govern most of their lives. There is a hesitancy to contest situations with a preference for acceptance of that which is given. There is consequently not the same level nor intensity of questioning.

Attempts at exporting the intellectual property of the course have encountered difficulties. The idea of intellectual property does not reside within the subject guides and forms that describe the intentions and procedures of the program. It cannot be that prescriptive; it is instead, elusive and intangible. This intellectual property resides, amongst other things, in the academic and cultural contexts within which we are located. This is manifest though peers and colleagues; and in the hallway conversations, in the classrooms, tutorials and at lectures and reviews; in the access to books, newspapers and magazines, video, film and theatre productions; the restaurants, bars and clubs, the conversations over coffee and at exhibition openings. A comparable Singaporean environment has been difficult to source and access.

Thus we have taken Singapore as our subject and used the city as both our laboratory and studio. Studios have been designed to uncover the potential of the city-as-site, and in so doing have enabled us to also research the context within which we are working. The initial explorations begun with the 'Singapore Slice', 'Sub-Cultures', and 'Urban Nomad', studios have continued through the 'Singapore Cyber Jewellery' and 'Artifice Park' studios. The recent INDEX.S 98 exhibitions manifest these outcomes.

singapore urban cyber jewellery

three frenetic journeys into the future

Ross McLeod

'From the eleventh floor we gazed at a continuous wall of hotels, HDB,s and office buildings glowing hazy orange against the motorway lights. For a moment I felt I was in a sci fi detective novel.' —*personal diary entry, January 1997*

Journey One—Personal (cyber) Space

The development of mankind is closely linked with our ability to develop prosthetics to enhance our physical capabilities. From the most basic stone tools and weapons, human beings have been able to create implements that further their natural abilities. Today roller blades, skateboards, push-bikes, motorbikes, cars, trains, and aeroplanes propel us around the globe at an accelerating rate. Physical disabilities are countered by wheelchairs, artificial limbs and electronic implants (hearing aids, pacemakers), and the manufacturing industry is sustained by automatic robotic assembly lines.

Modern man engages in interface with, and access to, computer generated information, communication and amusement. Whether we are aware of it or not we are becoming increasingly skilled manipulators of electronic media. In this rapidly growing technological world a new definition of the prosthetic arena has emerged: cyberspace, the physically uninhabitable, electronically generated alternate reality inhabited by human beings as an extension of their brain. Cyberspace in its simplest terms is a social environment. It is a form of techno-sociality which allows us to access people and information around the clock.

Through the use of communication/information devices we enter the electronic domain. By assimilating cyber capabilities and rules, we are further enhancing human capability beyond our normal parameters. In this sense, these and many other devices in our lives have become virtual prosthetics.

With any emerging technology the role of the designer is to humanise this

interaction between man and machine. The Apple computer screen for example, uses an analogy of an office space, complete with desktop, filing cabinets, pens, rulers, mailbox and trash. The familiarity gained through everyday use of these items allows easy navigation and operation of the virtual office. This design approach – relating the digital world to the physical, is one of the cornerstones of the computer revolution.

In order to engage in a prosthetic technology we must first recognise the capabilities and limits of the human body. We must explore the needs, wants, rituals and actions of our daily lives. The design of cyberware needs to consider human perception and pre-conception in order to successfully design within this environment. The physical embodiment of the device (its shape, size and form), how it is used and how it fits into the needs of our lifestyle must be carefully considered. Cyberspace created by the design must in a similar way hold a direct connection to our physical senses and psychological associations. We must feel comfortable in our engagement with the ethereal world of digital information.

As computer technology develops in the twenty first century, designers will be faced with a new dimension in the design of objects, spaces and buildings. The gap between the body and the mind, the real and the virtual, and the local and the global will blur and shift, creating a rich, complex, multi-layered field for designers to embrace.

Students explored the human connection with information technology on an intimate scale via the creation of a wearable device (such as a piece of jewellery), designed to access computer/ information/communication systems at any time of day or night. The piece of jewellery was to meld seamlessly with the wearers' actions and conscious needs.

The students not only formulated how the prosthetic is to be worn and used by its owner, they also indicated the nature of information the user would receive from it: designing an interface between man and machine.

Journey Two—The Intelligent Dwelling

While the *Cyber Jewellery* project defined the parameters of cyberspace and the potential for the enhancement of everyday activities via the use of electronic prosthetics, the *Intelligent Dwelling* project extended this knowledge into the realm of the house. Students developed design responses to the integration of intelligent building technologies in everyday rituals of home life.

Modernist architect Le Corbusier was quoted as saying the house is a 'veritable machine for habitation'[1]. This view of architecture was a response to the radical changes occurring in the world of machinery and manufacturing as building technology moved from the craft base of the nineteenth century to the pre-fabricated systems, materials and components familiar to us today. One of Le Corbusier's

1. Charles Edouard Jeanneret, 'Le Corbusier: 1910 - 65' *Les Editions d'Architecture* Zurich. 1967, p.28
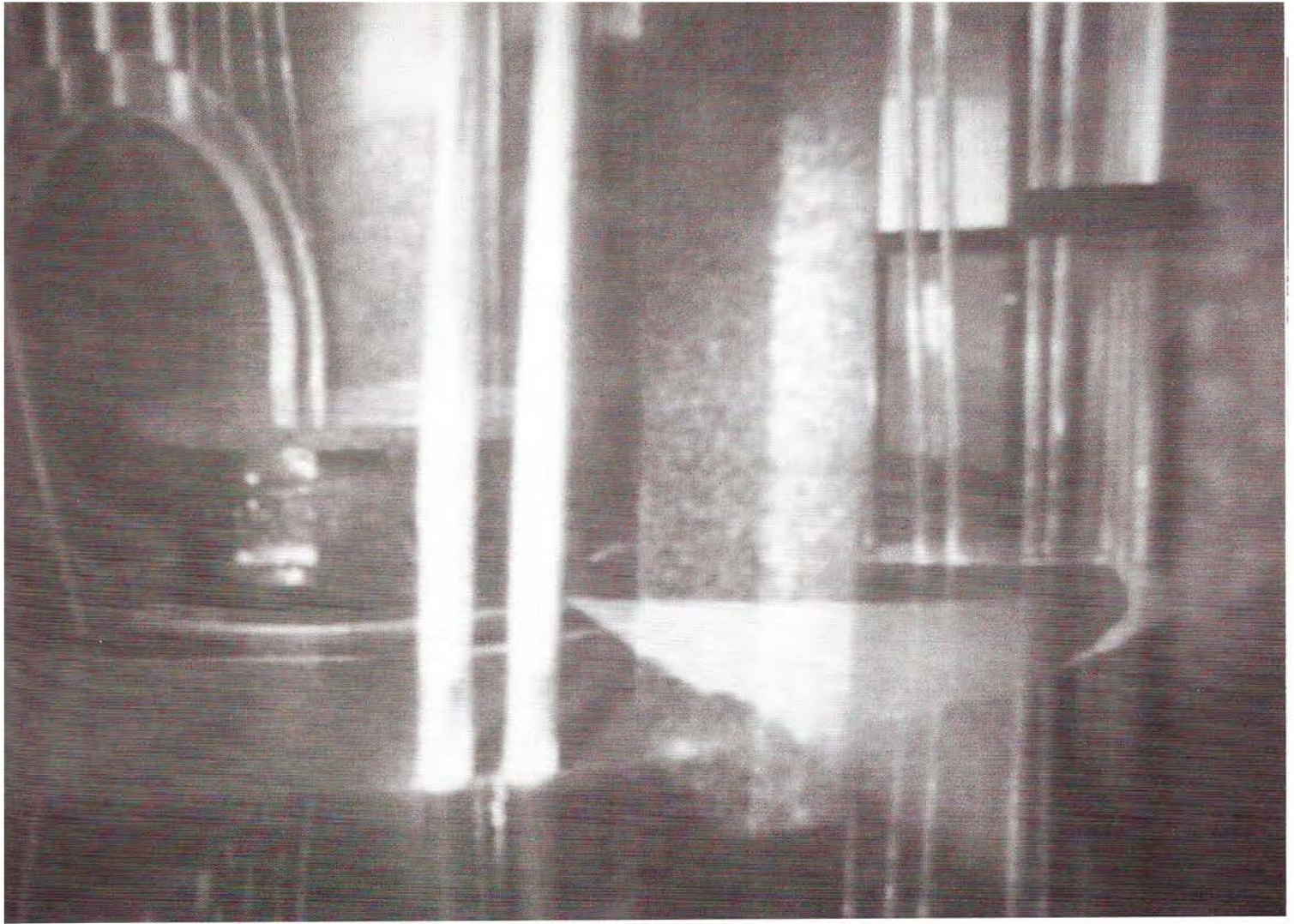
Kathryn Tan

seminal buildings was the *Unite de Habitation* in Marseilles (1945-1952). This high rise building and its style of living became the prototype for urban density housing, and is the form that has been successfully adopted by the Housing Development Board (HDB) for Singapore.

As Christian Thomsen points out in his 'Media Architecture' essay [2], we are now on the verge of another revolution in architecture, the result of advances in information and communication technologies and the widespread use of the computer. With these changes in mind we can frame a new definition of house and form new models for the idea of a dwelling place in the electronic age.

By examining their own home and mapping rituals enacted within them, the students began to redefine the activities of dwelling space beyond familiar room typologies. This study led to the construction of a dynamic 'ground zero' understanding of the interaction between humans and elements of architecture in our daily lives. From this base the students created an abstracted approach to the examination of dwelling, forming the conceptual foundation for further design exploration.

The design proposals were for an installation at the Singapore Home Exhibition called simply; 'The Intelligent Dwelling'. Students were encouraged to be radical, experimental and conceptual; the aim of the installation was to propose new forms of thought appropriate to our changing lifestyle based on the information gathered from the above study.

The designs address issues of space management, comfort, aesthetic, materiality, environment, entertainment, information technology, lighting, energy efficiency and ecological concerns.

3. From 'What I saw in America', *Film Courier Magazine*, December 1924

'The city flashes, revolves in red, blue and shining white, yells in green and sinks into black nothingness, only to experience that game of colours again, newly born a moment later.'—Fritz Lang [3]

Journey Three—Urban Global Space

As citizens of planet earth, ours is a mixture of differing countries, attitudes and approaches to the concept of modern living. Every day the products we use, television we watch, music we listen to and food we eat can come from all over the globe. Internet connection allows a permanent gallery/shopfront for personal interests open 24 hours a day, seven days a week; an international information mall in cyberspace.

From designing personal pieces of cyber jewellery and intelligent dwellings, the students were now asked to turn their thoughts toward public space; the fabric of the city and ultimately the inhabitants of the entire planet.

These issues were addressed through the concept of Urban Global Space, situated within the major public spaces of Singapore, where the city connects with the rest of the world. The urban global spaces are interior design interventions bringing together concepts on the latest information technologies, light projection systems and architectural structures in order to transform public space into an interactive multimedia event.

Students could now develop ideas using all the prosthetic tools learnt throughout the semester. The students began interfacing with their own personal cyberspace.

After setting the brief, I returned to Melbourne. Communication between the two cities was forged through electronic means. Students were asked to fax project descriptions and conceptual developments every two weeks. From this long distance discourse the projects evolved.

Students were asked to define Singapore's international identity and to propose ways of enriching and maturing the cities' definition of itself. If Singapore collects the world through information technology and popular culture, then to be an active part in world culture, the city state must project something in return.

The resulting projects articulated a cultural reading of Singapore, its inhabitants and their values. Responses to the brief included :

- A World Music Club sited at boat quay designed around the princi ples of frequency and vibration, transmission and reception;

- A fleet of Mobile Libraries situated at the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations providing information via books, CD ROMs and the internet;

- A fashion chain called *Street Style*, merging fashion trends from around the world, providing cyber cafes and video conferencing; and

- The Instant Office, situated in the atrium of SunTec city exhibition building, catering to the office and communication needs of exhibi tors and travelling businessman.

The final journey to Singapore was a blur of last minute pressure, panic and presentation. Critiques of projects went late into the night, with staff, guest prac-titioners and students locked in lengthy discussion over the implications of tech-nology on the practice of interior design. The sessions reflected much about a culture that thinks of design primary as a social force. Its participants remain acutely aware of local needs and practices, while absorbing influence and infor-mation from the accessible tide of global information.

The studio culmination was a multimedia installation of studio aims and out-comes. The intrigue of the proposals was reinforced by the rhythms of sound, light and spatial manipulation. Videos and slide shows, atmospherically lit mod-els, soundtracks and computer imaging engulfed the audience entering the Ur-ban Global Space. The subject and its medium of communication dissolving into the continuum of spatial experience.

artifice park

Tan Kok Meng

I. Koolhas, R. and Mau, B., S,M,L,XL, Evergreen publishers, Italy, 1994

'As a (former) theatre of the tabula rasa, Singapore now has the tenuous quality of a freeze-frame, of an arrested movement that can be set in motion again at any time on its way to yet another configuration; it is a city perpetually morphed to the next state'.—Rem Koolhaas[1]

In his colossal *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas tries to show (in a total of 78 pages), Singapore for what it represents—a Potemkin city fixated by the intoxicating high of the *tabula rasa*. With an ambivalent mixture of disdain and admiration he raises important questions about the nature of this city; the physical manifestations of its songlines.

What are the current social and cultural lines that are etched across the city,

280 METRES

20 METRES

GROUND

BASEMENT

Jackie Liew

underpinning the lives of its frenetic inhabitants? How are they represented? What are its forms? As a precedent, we looked at Wim Wender's Tokyo-Ga, which documents a poetic journey back to present-day Tokyo in search of that imaginary *one* aestheticised in Ozu's films. It illustrates the persistence of intrinsic Japanese cultural values underlying its modern-day forms; the pachinko bar is a formalised display for that particularly Japanese reticence in despair.

Notwithstanding our alleged affinity towards the *tabula rasa*, we began our investigations with engagement of these 78 pages of text and images. A site or situation in the city perceived by the individual to resonate something of the city's nature was chosen. Through interpretations of the site/situation, projects were conceived to both programmatically and formalistically address certain issues

about the metropolis. The projects conceived show different approaches to the theme.

Singapore's collective historical amnesia is well recognised. History is selectively represented in official records since colonial times. Jackie Liew's analysis of Raffles Place, a public square in the middle of the business district, uncovers some of the memories associated with Singapore's colonial times, including unsavoury images of squalor and misery. This project offers poignant resistance to the overarching need to wipe everything aside, to start a clean slate; it counters the idea of the *tabula rasa*. The strategy here is a metaphorical resurfacing of underlying layers of history; a palimpsest of past images as *aides memoir*. The ordered structural grid of the subway station (Mass Rapid Transit, or MRT) that this square sits on, is re-marked on the ground surface as a grid of nodes that short steel posts can be attached to. With this simple system, various programmatic functions can be overlaid onto this site, transforming it into a park for the lunch-time office crowd, an exhibition space, an outdoor stage, or a conversion into advertisement space by the drawing out of nylon screens, attaching benches, lights and signs.

In another part of the city, Ping Ying Lee's appendage to the existing War Memorial in commemoration of the civilians who died during the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), is a bold statement against the repression of a whole generation of memories. Whilst the present memorial is a picture of calm and dignity, represented as four reinforced concrete posts gathered obelisk-like, the appendage is a composition of metal and glass shards, skewered through the space of the existing obelisk. This project is clearly a personal crusade against the idea behind such a representation of war; a masquerade of peace and dignity behind which lies the horror and humiliation that the people of this city suffered under Japanese rule.

Another kind of concealment occurs at certain parts of Orchard Road at night. Somewhere near the beginning of this vibrant shopping street, prostitutes hide under the cover of shadows, waiting for potential customers to approach. Such a strategy of subtle display, hovering between light and shadow, presence and absence, gets appropriated by Razali Mahat, whose orgy of images real and projected, motionless and moving, cast against light and shadows in the busy subterranean linkages connecting masses of denizens of this city from shopping centres to subway stations. Razali seems to suggest the potentiality of absorption of subliminal messages through bodily experiences.

Movement and speed forms the theme of Pauline Chong's *Expressway Ski-World*. Here the interstitial spaces of the intertwining highways are interspersed with looping indoor artificial ski-slopes. The *Artifice Park* finds its conclusion here, where the total experience is orchestrated by an overriding sense of artificiality; whole environments are artificially controlled with technology. For a generation

THE SITE

MRT NETWORK (BASEMENT)　　　MOVEMENT PATTERNS

THE SHIFT

THE GRID

THE PLANE

THE PROGRAM
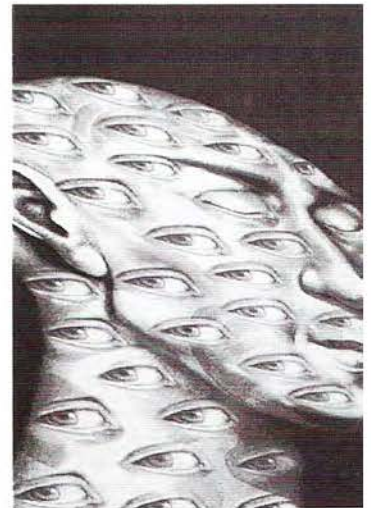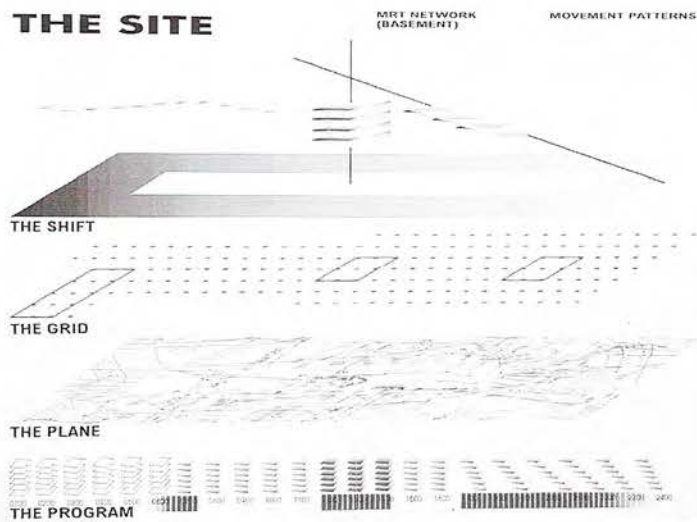
Jackie Liew

weaned on shopping centres and television, this tropical ski resort does not seem entirely implausible nor unnatural. The unquestioned reliance on technology to create new conditions in the city, only reveals its positivistic grip on the real and imaginary worlds of the student from Singapore.

Further eulogising of technology is found in Jonathan Ho's *Virtual Factory*, which follows the tradition of Archigram and the Japanese Metabolists of the sixties, in depicting future entertainment complexes as hermetically-sealed virtual environments that can be plugged onto a mega-structure mannered in functional industrial aesthetics. Interestingly the dichotomy between the outside and the inside—that is to say the public and the private realms—seems an unwitting take on the schism between the highly controlled public realm of Singaporeans and their sacredly-guarded private worlds.

Janice Tan's curious account of the studying habits of Singapore students reveals that in this city, the classical definition of the public realm can sometimes be problematic. Is the airport lounge a public or private space? Nobody can be sure anymore since Tan's studies show that students actually camp out on the floor of the city's international airport departure lounge, individually or huddled in groups, to study for school examinations. The notion of the airport in contemporary theories as a non-place, a place suspended in time, plus the fact that such activities are officially frowned upon by the airport authorities, seems to have precisely that power of attraction for these young people. Is it merely an act of civil-disobedience, or is that sense of placelessness and timelessness a vortex for a culturally displaced youth? This project points out some very interesting phenomena of our urban existence.

Other projects that investigate admirable social concerns include Uday Kumar's *Ad hoc Cineplex*, Ann Gan's *Backlane Memory Park*, and Lash Tan's *Art of Wheels*. Uday's *Cineplex* addresses the social phenomena of immigrant ethic Indian workers that invaded the central Singaporean area of Little India in search of comfort in the familiar. Thoroughly site specific, it engages the intangible social and physical dimensions to give form through an extension of the existing ad hoc programmes this site supports. *Art on Wheels* on the other hand, literally transports the proposed ad hoc programmes right to the doorsteps of local
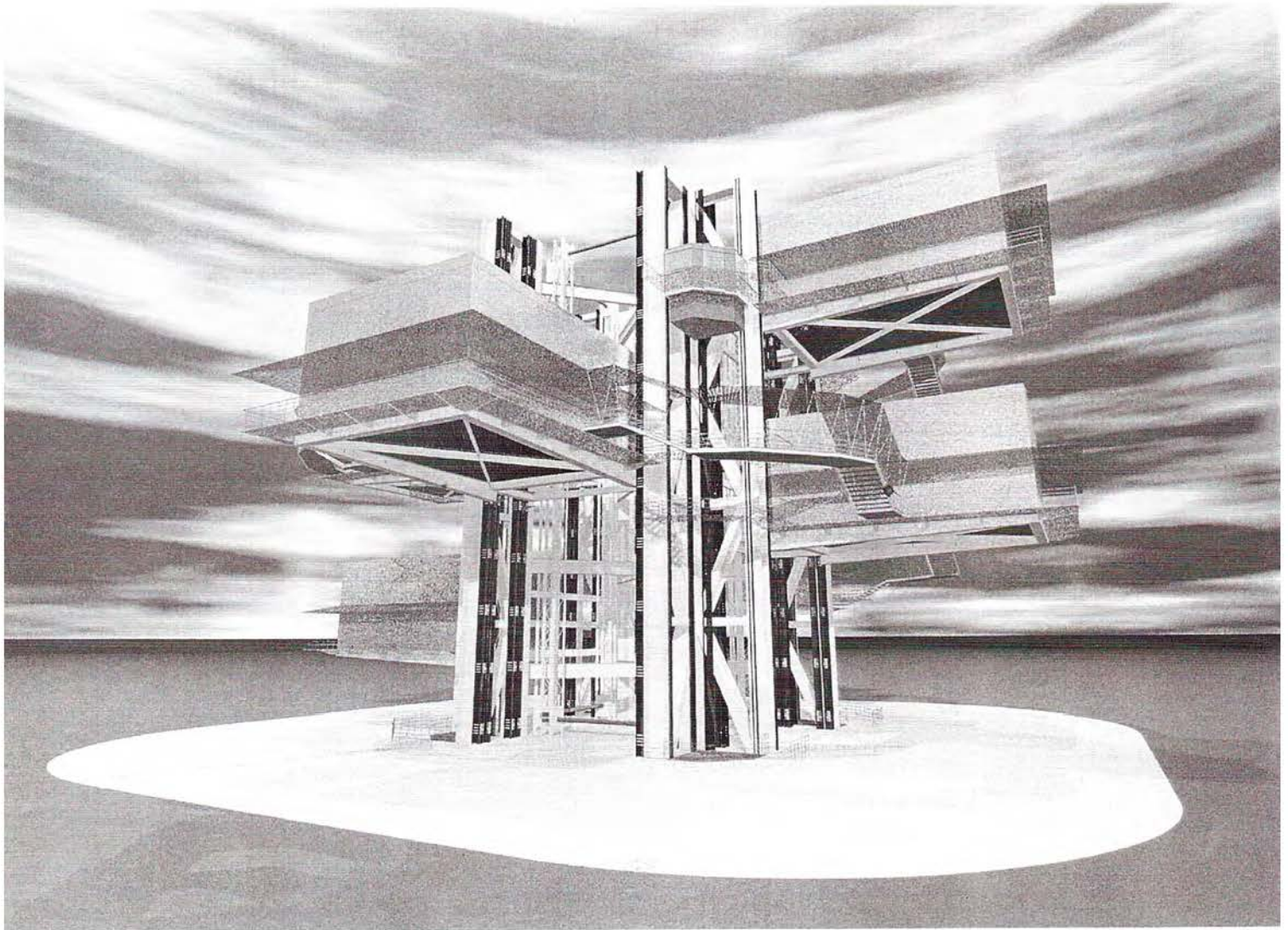
Johnothan Ho

communities. Tan's foray into the sanctified territories of art institutions such as the gallery and the theatre, questions such rarefied art spaces by reducing them to banal containers. Superficially read, Ann Gan's *Backlane Memory Park* seems also to offer banal abstractions of some idealised agrarian past of the ageing community that is being left behind in Tiong Bahru, an old, low-cost housing estate. But these geometricised representations of the past, such as rectangular plots containing fruit trees, farm chickens, vegetables in rows or even an artificial river with idyllic timber bridges, attain an almost surreal feel that speaks of a deeper sense of what our selective memories may be structured upon.

The *tabula rasa* and the generic image of a late twentieth century capitalist city may be how Singapore appears to her visitors. Researching into the trajectories of this city, these projects already begin to present fleeting images of other qualities of this ever-changing city.

INDEX.s '98 exhibition

Andrea Mina

1. One of two on campus galleries at LaSalle College, the other being the Dr Earl Lu Gallery.

2. An inner city venue for experimental performance and theatre, including a public art gallery.

The graduate exhibition may be taken as a clear measure of the success, or otherwise, of the objectives of the program. INDEX.s '98 was first exhibited at the LaSalle/SIA Gallery[1] and then publicly at SUBSTATION[2], in the city in October/November 1998. The objective was to make the work available to as broad an audience as possible by providing a public venue appropriate for this work in the context of contemporary and possible design practices.

Paramount to the intentions of the teaching program is the promotion of interior design as a proactive and not reactive practice is. Our objective is to produce graduates who are able to operate at the leading edge of development, participating in the entire process from inception to completion, and not merely responding to fixed, pre-determined briefs. Our measure of success is whether the

student is able to identify an issue, conduct a self-directed program to research and investigate the topic, and then develop a design through which the research is projected and manifest. These students have been able to develop and communicate self-generated projects that tackle identified issues, thus taking the projects beyond responses to set briefs, and into the realm of speculations based on and supported by their personal research, experimentation and discoveries.

Of particular interest are those projects that have engaged with the city by 'touching as lightly' as possible. Pauline Chong's *Void of the Everyday*, Lee Ping Ying's *Temporary Spaces* and Razali Mahat's *Backlanes* projects provide eloquent answers to Tan Kok Meng's[6] question; "[...] how do the forces of one's reality interact with the forces of the site?"

Mahat commits to his artistic instinct, aware of his actions in an environment conditioned by consumer demand and measured by production. He produces a project that dignifies the Singapore back lanes by simply making sharply visible that which is already there through the carefully orchestrated placement of lighting.

Pauline Chong provides a profound insight into the dignity and diversity of public and private life in the void spaces located beneath Singapore's high rise residential buildings. Her project demonstrates that careful observation and recording of the ordinary can be re-interpreted to reveal an astonishing poetic of every day existence, its ritual and spatial ordering. Her designed interventions work to enhance and augment these spaces through suggestion rather than prescription.

Lee Ping Ying projects the outcomes of her study that begin with an interest in the transformation of spaces into a study of the temporary spaces of Singapore, spaces such as temporary building site accommodation, ceremonial and festival spaces, markets, scaffolding and canopies. Her project is a speculation on the Asian city under going exponential growth layered with a flexible exo-skeleton capable of adapting to fluctuating demands.

Ann Gan's ephemeral proposition raises questions of the dematerialization of place in favour of program with her proposal for central city parking garages to be transformed at night into exercise and sports venues.

Perhaps more startling is Jackie Liew's insightful and provocative retail/consumer speculation. Liew exhibits cool control over his subject, saturating the presentation images with an equal urgency of speed and movement. This is an attractive masquerade for the chilling specter of 'disembodied' subjects fluidly negotiating 'limitless' space. Liew leaves little doubt that the work is supported by rigorous research and the appropriate theory.

In the work exhibited there is evidence of the passion and commitment that has been invested by these young designers. Their work is supported by research
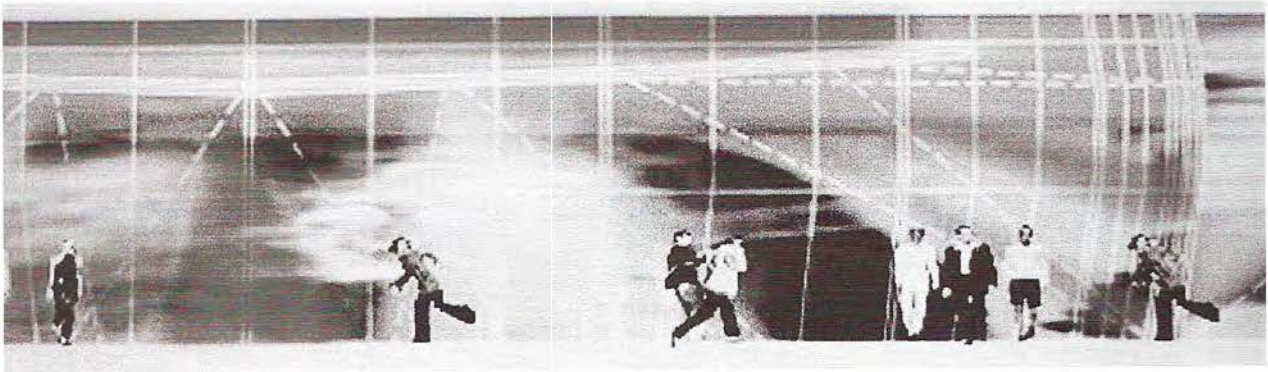
and studies that have taken the students past the known and the obvious and into the realms of invention and speculation. At the heart of all these projects is a deep interest in the city and its urban condition together with a willingness to question and re-define this context. These projects provide useful insight and commentary on contemporary Singapore and by implication the Asian cities of the region.

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