

Interiors

Independent Studio

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I had applied to the Independentstudio under the Interiors Chair because of my desire to work on a project in my home country, Singapore. A small island-nation, the country has worked its land manifold to make up for its lack of a hinterland to expand to. The Singaporean has developed a skewed notion of land itself – land has become an artifice – about thirty percent of the island nation sits on reclaimed, fabricated land, and what land we do have undergoes countless makeovers led by the many redevelopment plans meted out by the state. Land is no longer natural, of the ground itself, but instead a political, economical tool, It belongs to no one but the Singapore state, who has the power to control whom that land belongs to. Rem Koolhaas has called the country a tabularasa, a Potemkin metropolis, whilst local writers have labelled the country “a nation of nomads”. Most importantly the changing landscapes of Singapore affect not only how the country looks, but how its people behaves. Rituals, memories, traditions become lost and altered because of the shifting environment.

The graduation project thus seeks to investigate how might one continue and establish significance on a changing landscape. The project takes the site of an existing Chinese cemetery in Singapore currently embedded in the heart of a residential estate. It had lost its land to state planning, and now sitting on leased land, is potentially poised to have the rest of its cemetery taken away for redevelopment. The graduation project took this site because of those two conditions, and saw the site as a representation of the island-nation itself – of having been altered, and knowing it faces a future where it could be altered (or in the case of the cemetery, erased completely),

Research about the history of the site, surveys of the public attitude to the cemetery and how the nature of burial and its accompanying rituals have been altered from coffin to cremation were extremely important in forming the foundation of the project. At the same time, a parallel research focusing on local scholar's writings on urban change in Singapore established an understanding of its impact on the Singapore psyche as a whole. Landscape became understood as a political tool that could lead to the suppression of certain identities in favour of state-approved ones, whilst the ritual became identified as the potential vessel that traversed space and time in spite of the shifting landscape.

More specifically, land planning has rehoused burial sites to the fringes of the island-nation, alienating the dead from the living, whilst the move from graveyard to columbarium has reduced the space for rituals from one that extended over a significant landscape to one that is now performed within the width of a corridor. And yet, at moments of festivals (the Hungry Ghost Festival, Qing Ming Jie) spaces to commemorate the dead are temporarily reinserted into the realm of the living, and these rituals then unfold onto the public landscape.

The framework for the project thus proposes transforming the burial ritual as its starting point. It investigates how the object of the ritual – the urn – can be carried through the landscape of the site as part of the “burial” and commemoration process, allowing ritual to meet landscape even in cremation, but at the same time suggesting and normalizing the site-less-ness of our dead (and living) in a changing landscape.

Much of the design development thus studied where moments of ritual occurred on site, and its relationship with the public. The project started off conceived as an architectural object, but the reflection of the site research and design studies primarily through the making of models resulted instead in the use of figures that spread through the site, framing the existing temple and cemetery. The columbarium thus takes the form of a colonnade that wraps around the cemetery, almost as a protective wall that then extends to complete the figure of the temple.

The study of each architectural element, how the wall mediated between inside/outside, private/public, how the (ceremonial) roof touched the ground and its emphatic parallel to sky and burial became essential in developing the language of the architecture. The choice of contrasting a lighter timber to a heavier concrete structure then became apparent, which in turn led to the development of how the construction of the building itself (for example, casting concrete in-situ) could suggest delineation of territories that resisted future changes to the site. This attitude carried through to the treatment of the landscape, where the landscape became just as significant as the architecture in the creation of figures that marked thresholds to the site edges, the temple boundary, the recovering of the site’s previous axiality, and also providing moments of ritual to occur. Choice of planting, and how that relates to the planting outside of the site, and the treatment of the ground surface were then closely examined.

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama writes on how much of finding significance on site is about uncovering what already exists. This project seeks precisely to do this, by intensifying the use and significance of the site through the insertion of a new columbarium, tapping onto the existence of burial rituals that play out on the landscape, and by reshaping the landscape such that it serves both the private and public rituals, and the surrounding residential estate. In fact these pieces were found to have a symbiotic relationship to each other – that by preserving the landscape, one can allow the ritual of the columbarium to extend past that width of the corridor, whilst the landscape in turn gains significance in moments of ritual. At the same time, this project then becomes a counterpoint to the *tabula rasa* trend of redevelopment in Singapore; Not by flattening the site and intensifying its land usage, but by finding ways in which an existing programme and site can be shared with new user groups, larger communities.

The scale of the project has been extremely challenging. Firstly the large scale of planning the entire site, but also its contrast to the much smaller scale of the architectural interventions and the greater reliance on shaping

the landscape of the site. At the same time, the nature of the independent studio – of having to design and develop one's own brief – has led me to become extremely critical of the foundation of my project. In this sense the research as justification for choice of site and programme, nature of architectural scale and language was extremely useful in carrying and rationalising the design development through. This project has allowed me to become more reflective of both myself and the way I work, but also of the blurred boundaries between object, architecture and landscape.