



# Places and Faces in Katong

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*"What's your favourite place in the neighbourhood?"*

*Perhaps you are cycling along East Coast Road in the morning and are drawn to rows of charming and colourful two and three-storey shophouses. These shophouses are rich in architecture heritage and culinary culture. You park your bike on the back lane and stroll along the shaded five-foot way enroute to your favourite confectionary Chin Mee Chin CMC, where the air is thick with smell of coffee and kaya on homemade toast bread.*

*The coffee shop started out in 1925 and became popular for its baked goods and homemade bread delivery business. CMC began to introduce traditional Eurasian confectionery in the 1970s to cater to the growing Eurasian community – offering house specialities such as Sugee Cakes, Cream Horns and more. With the demise of its original owner, it shuttered its gates in 2018. Regular customers were saddened as a 100-year-old chapter within the Historic East came to a closed. Or did it?*

*CMC reopens in 2020. The new owner happened to be a neighbour and long-time friend of the family and having grown up with the coffeeshop, was intent on preserving CMC as it was. Apart from a fresh new coat of paint, a new signboard, some renovation to the kitchen space, and the opening of a new outdoor area, the main dining space is still pretty much the same as before. The familiar wall tiles and green mosaic floor tiles have been preserved and given a good scrubbing and a new lease.*

*You grew up in the neighbourhood and feel so at home with local cakes, homemade bread, kopi, and the familiarity of the aunties who used to run this traditional coffee shop. As you sip*

*your coffee, you wonder what will happen to a traditional coffee shop like CMC in the current competitive coffee shop trade.*

*We identify with different parts of the neighbourhood, and the best neighbourhoods have something for everyone to love and remember."*

## The identity of places

The identity of a place is not a simple address or a point on a map, rather it is our experiences that governs the uniqueness, strength, and genuineness of the identity of places. It is not just the "identity of" a place that is important, but the "identity with" a place, whether individuals or a group, are experiencing it as an insider or outsider of the place. Edward Relph (1976, p44-62) explains that the identity of a place comprises three fundamental elements – the static physical setting, the activities taking place and the associated meanings:

The physical setting: This is what the place looks like, such as the land, the buildings, the spaces and the things in it.

The activities: This is what people do in the place, such as work, play, learn, travel, etc.

The meanings: This is what the place means to people, such as their feelings, memories, beliefs, values, etc.

The anecdotal account of CMC is used to demonstrate these three elements. First, there is the physical setting of rows of shophouses of varying building heights. This provides the backdrop to the observable activities – the everyday activities of a coffee shop that take place within the shophouse. And infusing both physical setting and activities is a set of meanings - in particular the potential loss of something familiar and the recovery of something memorable.

It is possible to visualise East Coast Road as consisting of rows of shophouses with its accompanying network of side and back lanes as it is represented in a Google map. A keen observer of the activities of people may observe their movements - some moving in recognisable pattern, some carrying objects, some producing objects, and some consuming objects, etc. But a person experiencing these buildings and activities see them as far more than these - they are heritage buildings that are beautiful or ugly; they are useful activities to be continued or hindrances to the introduction of new activities, they are everyday experiences that are familiar and comforting or new and alienating - in short, they are meaningful. The first two

elements can probably be easily appreciated, but the component of significance and meaning is much more difficult to grasp.

The meanings of places may be rooted in the physical settings and activities, but they are not defined by them. Rather they are defined by human intentions and experiences. Meanings have the capacity to evolve and shift, transferring from one set of objects to another. This can be further illustrated by our CMC anecdote.

*"The truth is that the place might look like the old CMC, but one cannot help feeling that they have not really managed the recapture the soul of the old place.*

*A younger and more efficient crew has replaced the aunties who used to run the place. Time will tell if they continue to be simply workers or if they stay long enough to embody a new CMC spirit.*

*The familiar range of food items are still sold. Buns are still toasted over a charcoal fire and that the kaya is still stirred manually over a stove, so that does add some authenticity back to the kaya toast. However, the buns are different from in the past. They do have a "home-baked" quality about them but just not rustic in the same way."*

CMC has introduced signature cream horns, sugar cakes and brown buns in the 1970's to cater to the Eurasian community living around there at the time. They can replicate the menu of the past and they can also introduce items which will appeal to the current generation of Singaporeans. To the new generation, CMC may be quite neutral. But with the new menu using their trademark homemade traditional skills, CMC may continue as a beloved and memorable spot even for a new generation.

What is significant is the way in which physical settings, activities, and meanings are always connected and influence each other. For example:

Physical setting and activities create locations: This means that the place has a specific position and function, such as a park, a school, a market, etc.

Physical setting and meanings create experiences: This means that the place has a certain atmosphere and impression, such as beautiful, scary, sacred, etc.

Activities and meanings create histories: This means that the place has a shared story and culture, such as traditions, events, legends, etc.

These connections are part of a place and make it unique. The identity of a place affects how we experience and identify with it.

### **"Places" matter most**

The significance of places surpasses that of individual buildings or vehicular traffic. However, across the globe, our planning efforts appear to focus predominantly on the latter aspects. It seems that we are gradually losing the capacity to step back and assess the outcomes of our endeavours. We need to stop worrying quite so much about individual buildings or a collection of roads and think instead about places in their entirety. We must focus on creating appealing and intricate spaces tailored to the scale of pedestrian movement rather than vehicular traffic. We are witnessing a return to the spirit of urbanism that characterised well-loved traditional towns and cities. Francis Tibbalds (1992, pp 1-17) explains that during the 1950s and 1960s many towns and cities around the world underwent change on an unprecedented scale in terms of massive built development and in terms of massive highway constructions. This undoubtedly resulted in considerable commercial vitality and accessibility for motor vehicles, but it also rarely produced physical environment that which are now widely recognised as being attractive.

The issue largely stems from the disappearance of urban scale or granularity. Traditional towns and cities were composed of blocks of buildings with streets around them. Most traditional towns and cities are compact and tightly organised with a simple block layout punctuated by hard and soft open spaces. In many areas, this distinct structure has been lost or substantially diminished. A combination of desire for new roads, new shopping centres, new offices, and various forms of mass housing as in many instances, led to the loss of original street patterns.

It is not only streets that are important. The places that make up the public realm comes in many shapes, sizes, and uses. They include streets, squares, public footpaths, parks, open spaces, riversides, and seafronts. These places belong to the community. It is important never to forget that they are for the use, benefit, and enjoyment of the community. In designing and developing buildings and environments which interrelate with the public realm, it is essential to ensure that this value of the public realm to the community is acknowledged, respected, and enhanced.

Public places within a town belong to the community of that town. The proper civilised use of places – streets, squares, back lanes, promenades, and so on – can be achieved visually,

functionally, and psychologically, through thoughtful and imaginative design. If, for example, car drivers feel like guests in a predominantly pedestrian area, they are likely to behave like guests. The same for buildings. New buildings are also “guests” in the existing built environment and need to show deference to their host environment.

The challenge is clear – can we find ways to promote the importance of the public realm in our towns and cities. It demands a new set of priorities in which places take precedence over building and traffic. The more we learn to collaborate for the greater good of the public realm, the greater the benefits for all. It takes precedence over mere technical performance and attempts to present the built environment or physical setting more broadly as the location of human activity and meanings.

### **Interrelating physical setting, activities, and meanings in ‘Made in Tokyo’, ‘Pet Architecture’ and ‘A Little Bit of Beijing’ Series**

When investigating the concept of urban identity, there is a need to distil its essence and understand the factors contributing to its makeup. Much like a person's identity, urban identity parallels it by embodying characteristic locales, human activity, places of interest, physical connections, and everyday conversations. The studio's interest lies in delving into these attributes and reinforcing the idea of 'Historic East' as an identity, with Tanjong Katong serving as a key characteristic locale.

Streets are where people engage in a dialogue with a neighbourhood, providing the space to form a relationship with the place. Impressions are formed along the streets, acting as the lens through which we peer into the essence of a locale. Therefore, it is crucial to establish that any spatial adaptation of streets should primarily serve the curation of a dialogue with its users.

It distinguishes itself from other identity corridors that embody natural and geographical features. Being a highly urbanized corridor already teeming with life, it has developed its character over time, mirroring the evolving desires of the people. This calls for deeper insights into how we can sensitively enhance the characteristics of Tanjong Katong to contribute to the identity of the Historic East. The studio takes reference from ‘Made in Tokyo’ in its methodology of documenting the everyday life in relation to physical settings, in conjuncture with the unique comic strip approach in the ‘A Little Bit of Beijing’ series to appreciate local narratives present

in Tanjong Katong and the small projects documented in ‘Pet Architecture.’ The studio recognizes the need for a multi-scalar approach towards re-shaping our built environment. Large-scale interventions, including landscaping and planning initiatives, are complemented by relatively small, locally focussed projects as mechanism for change. Our future built environment will need to consider this type of innovative combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to planning. This goes well with the idea of private (practicing firms) and public (SUTD & URA ) collaborations as a means of creating alternative forms of urban developments.

**Reference 1. Made in Tokyo<sup>3</sup>** is a guidebook that documents the everyday built form of Tokyo. ‘Made in Tokyo’ looks at the functional hybrids of the city's current situation. A good example is the highway department store, two floors of retail nestled below the expressway in Ginza and stretching the length of five hundred meters. The authors see these types of buildings as unique to Tokyo, a product of its economics, village fabric and people that help enrich the experience of the city. ‘Made in Tokyo’ inspires the studio to look at Tanjong Katong through the lens of documenting its everyday built form and its own functional hybrids in a guidebook, investigating the buildings and its quirks that give character to the neighbourhood. An example then is the overhead pedestrian bridge linking Roxy Square to row of shophouses along East Coast Road, being so essential in the everyday experiences, of one having a leisurely stroll to Birds of Paradise across the street for a pint of ice cream after a hearty meal at the Wahiro Izakaya Joint nestled on the ground floor of Roxy Square. They are complementary in nature and experiences would not be the same without one or the other.

**Reference 2. Pet Architecture<sup>4</sup>** is a guidebook that also documents the everyday built form of Tokyo. Pet Architecture looks at the impact of tiny structures that fill the gaps in the city's fabric. A good example of the latter is Coffee Saloon Kimoto, a triangular structure with a capacity of four customers. This encourages the studio to identify pockets of spaces within the area of study to project small architectural insertions that activate spaces and enhance the character of the street and locale. State corridors, residual spaces between developments and undercroft spaces (under the stair of overhead pedestrian bridges) all serve as starting points where the studio may investigate the potential of its interventions.

**Reference 3. A Little Bit of Beijing<sup>5</sup>** is a collection of architectural drawings and images presented in comic strip format that encourages the reader to delve into the intimate

*experiences of the everyday life of a person. It portrays the relationships between people and of people and spaces, buildings, streets. The studio looks to employ the same approach in documenting the everyday scene of Katong, so that the students may gain a more intimate understanding of the memories and moments that are created and cherished. These insights can then guide the studio in the thoughtful rethinking of Katong as a historic locale that preserves the past but serves the needs of an ever-changing city.*

### **Tanjong Katong**

Tanjong Katong is part of the conservation area in Singapore, well known for its “old world charm”, with the area along Tanjong Katong Road, between Dunman Road and Mountbatten Road, designated as a secondary settlement conservation area in 2003 by the URA. The historic area sees a mix of shophouses of ornate Late Style, Art Deco Style, and more streamlined Modern Style shophouses built after World War Two, anchoring the social memory and distinct identity of the place. Prominent landmarks include former Tanjong Katong Girls School, Tanjong Katong Post Office (which has lost the original colonial look after renovation but remains one of the longest standing neighbourhood post offices in Singapore on its original location) and Telecom Exchange Building.

It has a mix of residential, entertainment developments located close to East Coast Park. As a city-fringe neighbourhood just 10 – 15 minutes lying between the CBD and Changi Airport. It is a residential choice popular with expatriates and a destination for locals and visitors due to its rich history and vibrant Peranakan culture, blending tradition, food, and architectural heritage. Shopping malls, sporting amenities and prestigious schools lie within the Katong area. The popularity of the place both with locals and tourists can cause conflicting traffic congestions during peak hours and the weekends as parking can be difficult within the area.

### **Historic East Identity Corridor**

Since 2002, URA has recognized and progressively enhanced eighteen identity nodes all over Singapore. Two of such nodes lie within the Katong area. The five Identity Corridors builds on the identity nodes, and have evolved into delightful places, rich with heritage and identity, retaining distinctive neighborhoods. The main spine of the Historic East corridor parallels the East Coast and serves as a connection between the city Centre and Changi. It is envisioned as a “charming network of walkable streets and neighborhoods extending to the East Coast”, from Old Airport Road to Geylang Road, Siglap and Bayshore areas.

The Geylang Serai Cultural Belt will rejuvenate within this corridor.<sup>6</sup>

### **History of Tanjong Katong**

Prior land reclamation in Marine Parade, Tanjong Katong fronted the sea. Raffles set aside the segment between Sandy Point (tip of Tanjong Rhu) and Deep-Water Point (Tanjong Katong) as a marine yard in the 1820s. This historic stretch of marine yard corresponds with the middle of the three horizontal lines of current Historic East corridor. By the 1860s, boat yards proliferated there, attracting related businesses such as boathouses and beachside resorts. It was an early coastal landmark of Singapore where holiday villas dotted amidst idyllic coconut groves, well known as a health resort providing quiet weekend retreats from bustling city life<sup>7</sup>. The history of the place is rooted in wealth and prestige as affluent English, Anglo-French and Chinese settlers built recreation clubs, hotels, and mansions there, and created trading businesses there, turning the area into a wealthy suburb. During the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, the southern stretch of shophouses along Tanjong Katong road between Wilkinson Road and Goodman Road used to house “comfort women”.

### **Studio Objectives**

For first half of the semester, students will explore street typologies in highly urbanised places that typically transcend a singular use. The multiplicity of use of streets allows for critical operations such as deliveries to shops and waste collection to continue to take place, whilst allowing for people to populate the streets freely and safely. These explorations may also include appendices to the streets, for example to allow for a clear segregation between foot traffic and vehicular traffic, or ones that improve the climatic design of the streets.

Such street design proposals may include the following design considerations:

- Readjustment of vehicular traffic to promote greater foot traffic.
- Buildings are seen as a composition of objects within a street.
- Spaces between buildings are seen as community meeting spaces and opportunities, thus extending the public realm from the street into more intimate spaces.
- Frontages of buildings that engage people in dialogue, curating their experiences as they walk along a street.

Students will develop a street setting within Katong, complete with drawings and physical models that is thoughtfully motivated by the observations of human behaviour.

For the second half of the semester, students will explore the small-scale architectural interventions that are integrated into the redesigned street. This approach takes inspiration from Atelier Bow-Wow's 'PET' Architecture, where architectural proposals do not negatively disrupt the inherent character of the street but enhances it facilitates greater dialogue. Such small-scale proposals may include the following design considerations:

- Reversible design as a kit-of-parts approach to intervene lightly.
- Proposals that are seen as "flexible grounds" for a diversity of use.

Students will develop a small-scale architectural proposal within the thoughtfully designed street, complete with drawings and physical models that showcase the nature of reversibility through an innovative kit-of-parts approach.

### **Studio Set-up**

The studio explores the idea of rethinking Katong in Singapore. Students will investigate opportunities to redefine spaces in everyday Katong by challenging the components of identity such as physical settings, activities, and meanings.

The total number of twenty-four students will be arranged in four sub-groups comprising six students per group to study eight sections of the Katong area from Tanjong Katong Road, Haig Road, Joo Chiat Road to Still Road. Each sub-group will insert six small architectural projects (2 projects per pair) based on their observations and study of Katong.

### **Observing Tanjong Katong [1 week]**

Observe people going about their lives in selected streets of Tanjong Katong.

Record people engaging the streets using observational film techniques.

List the behaviours of users from the observational films.

### **Precedent Study – Small Installations [1 week]**

Study a small architectural installation/precedent with a compelling narrative/theme.

Study the outdoor, indoor setting, and activities/uses in each architectural installation precedent.

### **Site Analysis –Tanjong Katong [1 week]**

Analysis of site that includes:

- site location,
- function,
- neighbourhood context (zoning, boundaries, height, site area),
- natural physical features (topography, vegetation patterns, drainage patterns),
- man-made features (surrounding buildings),
- circulation access (vehicles and pedestrian movement),
- climatic conditions (temperature, sun path, wind, rainfall),

### **Lively Streets – Tanjong Katong [2 weeks]**

Generate lively streets through thoughtful repurposing of existing roads and sidewalks.

### **Small Architectural Design - Outdoor Setting [2 weeks]**

Generate impact of small architecture in outdoor settings with interesting activities and compelling narrative with thoughtful design of frontages.

### **Japan Feedback – Instagram Recordings (1 week)**

### **Small Architectural Design - Indoor Settings [4 weeks]**

Generate impact of small architecture in outdoor settings with interesting activities and compelling narrative.

### **Exhibition - Preparation and Set-up [2 weeks]**

### **References**

- 1 Relph, E. (1976). "On the Identity of Places". in Relph, E. (1976), *Place and Placelessness*. Pion, London, 44-62.
- 2 Tibbalds, F. (1992). "Places Matter Most". in Tibbalds, F. (1992), *Making People-Friendly Towns: Improving the public environment in towns and cities*, Longman, Harlow, 1-17.
- 3 Kajima, M & Kuroda, J. (2001). "Made in Tokyo: Guidebook". Kajima Institute Publishing Co.
- 4 Atelier Bow-wow. (2002). "Pet Architecture". World Photo Press.

5 Han, L & Yan, H. (2017). "A Little Bit of Beijing: Sanlitun". Tongji University Press.

Atelier Bow-wow. (2010). "Behaviorology". Rizzoli Intl Pubns (US).

6 URA, Identity Corridors (accessed 2023 Nov 30)

Atelier Bow-wow. (2016). "Commonalities". Lixil.

7 Tanjong Katong, Singapore Infopedia (accessed 2023 Nov 30)

Han, L & Yan, H. (2017). "A Little Bit of Beijing: 7 9 8". Tongji University Press.

**Reading List**

Han, L & Yan, H. (2017). "A Little Bit of Beijing: Nanluoguxiang". Tongji University Press

**Schedule**

Week	Date	Program	Remark
<b>MODULE 1   UNPACKING KATONG: STREETS AND BUILDINGS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD</b>			
<b>01</b>	23/01	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 1: 'Places' matter most (Andrew Lee), Planning Katong (URA)  Drawing Standards and Techniques	Briefing of assignment after Lecture  Site Model
	25/01	<b>Observing Tanjong Katong</b>  Observational Film (shown at Mid, Final review, and during Japan trip)  Site Visit – Katong	Instagram Story Format
<b>02</b>	30/01	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 2: History of Katong (Dr. Kang Shua)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	01/02	<b>Street Study</b>  Street Sections of Katong  Flat Axonometric of chosen streets	Diagrams/Sections  In Reference to Made in Tokyo
<b>MODULE 2   UNEARTHING KATONG: CONVERSATIONS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD</b>			
<b>03</b>	06/02	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 3: Parts and Whole in Made in Tokyo (Tat Haur)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	08/02	<b>Site Analysis &amp; Recordings (Interviews)</b>  Unearthing <u>collective</u> meaning and memories in Katong	(Narrative in reference to Little Bit of Beijing)
<b>04</b>	13/02	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 4: Impact of Small Projects (Teik Rong)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	15/02	<b>Lively Streets</b>  Comic Strips (in reference to a Little Bit of Beijing)	

<b>05</b>	20/02	<b>Lively Streets</b>	Using Site Model
		Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
	22/02	<b>Small Architectural Design - Outdoor Setting</b>	Refinement of previous deliverables
		Pet architecture in gap spaces	
		Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	

<b>Week</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Remark</b>
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### **MODULE 3 | ENCODING KATONG: GROUND NARRATIVES IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

<b>06</b>	27/02	<b>Small Architectural Design - Outdoor Setting</b>	Refinement of previous deliverables
		Pet architecture in gap spaces	
		Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
	29/02	<b>Small Architectural Design - Outdoor Setting</b>	
		Pet architecture in gap spaces	
		Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	

<b>07</b>	04/03	<b>Recess Week – Tokyo Study Trip</b>	Review with Tsukamoto
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<b>08</b>	12/03	<b>Studio</b>	
		Production	
	14/03	<b>Mid-Review</b>	Review Panel - URA, SUTD & Guest Reviewers
		1 x Observational Film	
		1 x Guidebook on Katong (including Precedent Studies)	
		1 x Site Model 1:1000	
		1 x Massing Model 1:1000 (inserted into Site Model)	
		2 x A1 Drawings (Guidebook Format)	

### **MODULE 4 | RETHINKING KATONG: SMALL PROJECTS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

<b>09</b>	19/03	<b>Lecture Series</b>	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
		Lecture 5: LKY World City - Bilbao (URA)	
	21/03	<b>Small Architectural Design - Outdoor Setting</b>	
		Pet architecture in gap spaces	
		Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	

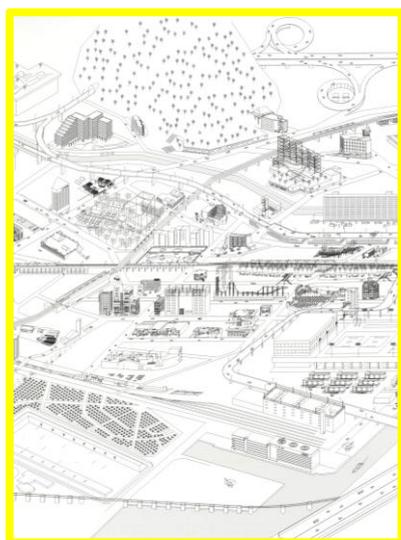
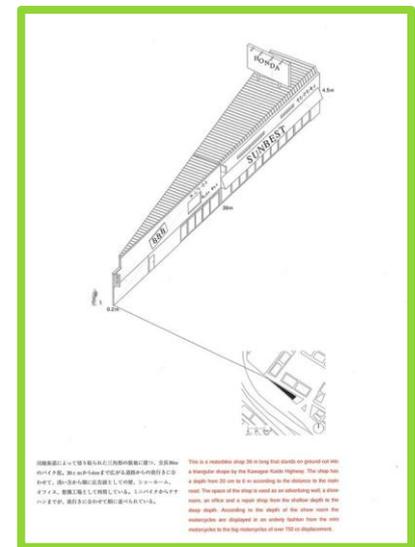
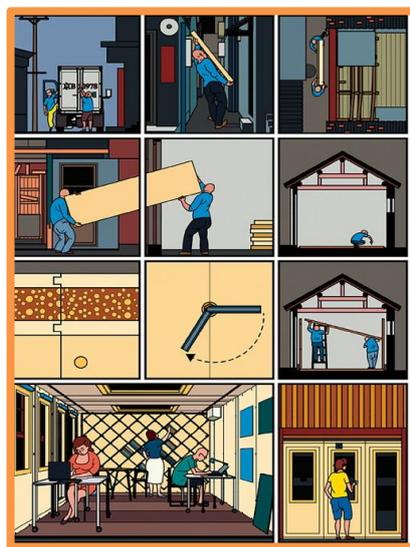
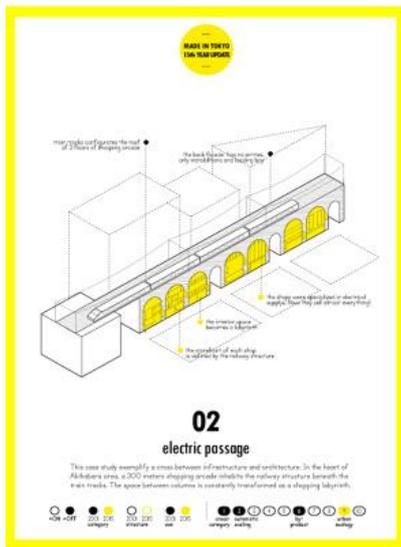
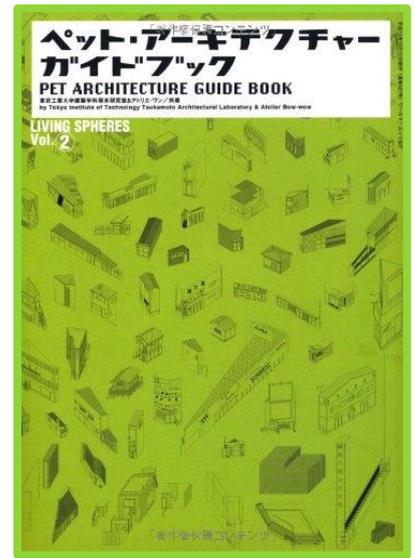
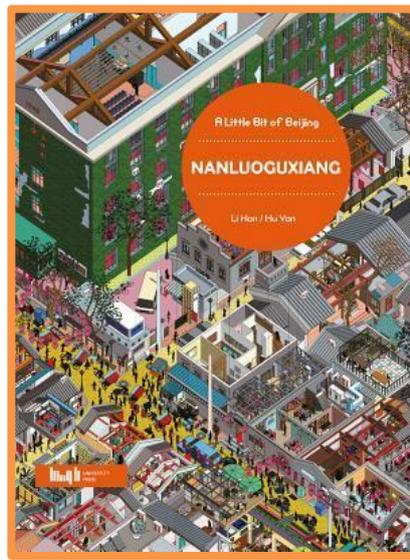
<b>10</b>	26/03	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 6: LKY World City - NYC (URA)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	28/03	<b>Small Architectural Design - Indoor Setting</b>  Impact of architecture on human behaviour in common spaces  Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
<b>11</b>	02/04	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 7: LKY World City - Suzhou (URA)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	04/04	<b>Small Architectural Design - Indoor Setting</b>  Impact of architecture on human behaviour in common spaces  Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
<b>12</b>	09/04	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 8: LKY World City - Medellin (URA)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	11/04	<b>Small Architectural Design - Indoor Setting</b>  Impact of architecture on human behaviour in common spaces  Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
<b>13</b>	16/04	<b>Lecture Series</b>  Lecture 9: LKY World City - Seoul (URA)	Briefing of assignment, show and tell of previous assignment after Lecture.
	18/04	<b>Small Architectural Design - Indoor Setting</b>  Impact of architecture on human behaviour in common spaces  Hand sketches + Models + Drawings	
<b>14</b>	23/04	<b>Exhibition/Review Space set up at URA Centre*</b>	Review Panel - URA, SUTD & Guest Reviewers
	25/04	<b>Final Review</b>  1 x Observational Film 1 x Site Model 1:1000 1 x Physical Model 1:50 / 1:25 4 x A1 Drawings (Guidebook Format)	

**\*To be confirmed**

Studio Area of Study



References



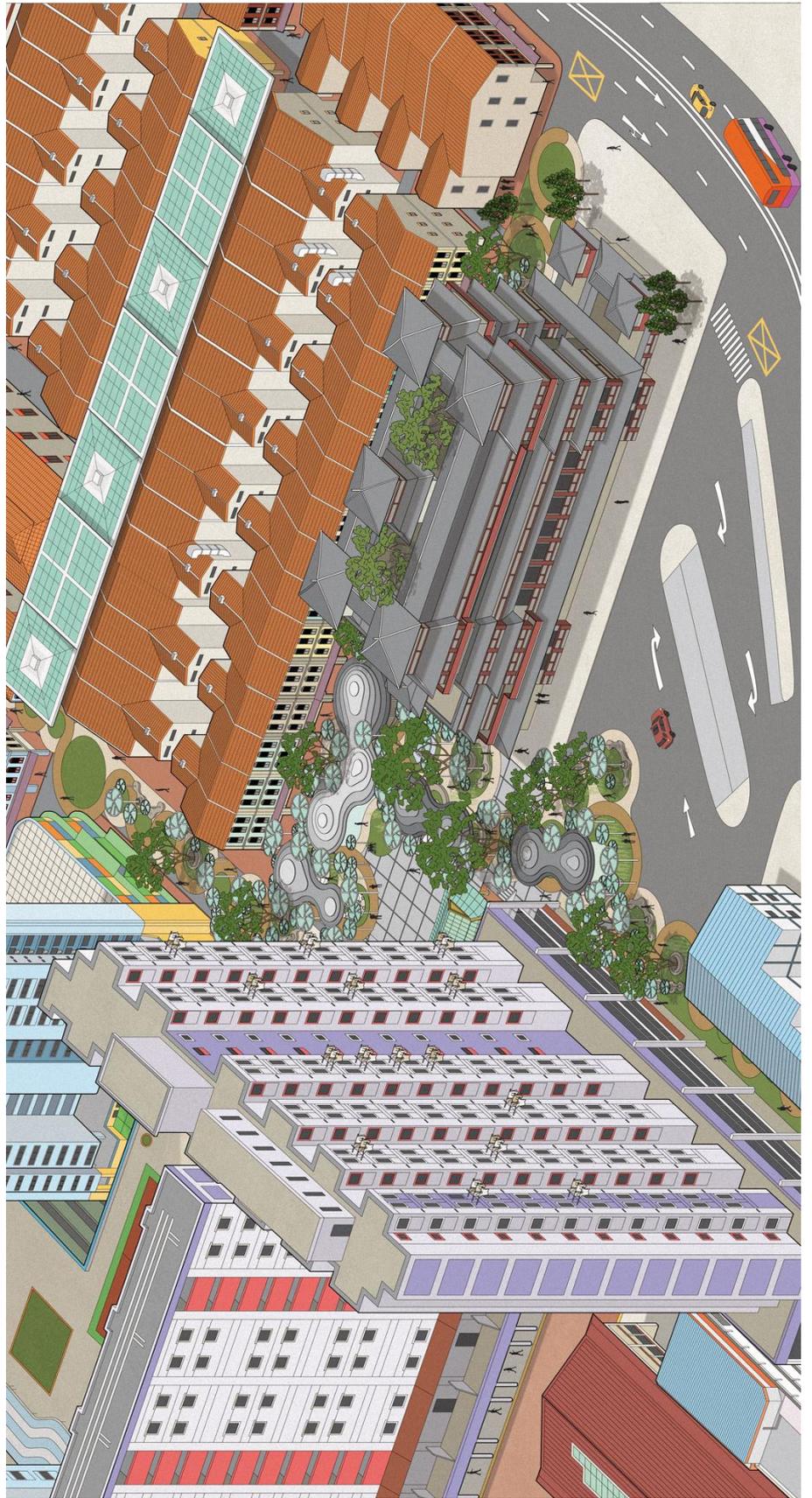
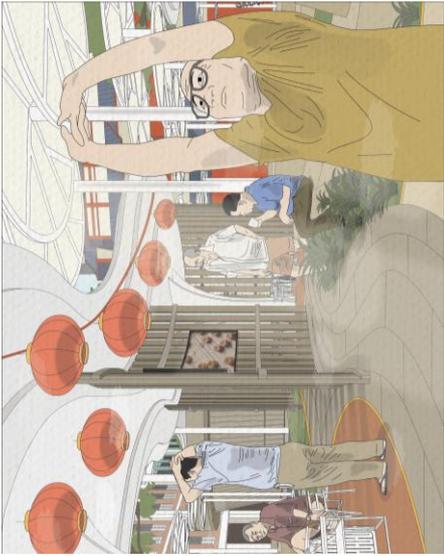
STREETS & BUILDINGS

CONVERSATIONS

SMALL PROJECTS

ANNEX

References



ANNEX

Project Reference: BONUS TRACK/TSUBAME ARCHITECTS

