

Architecture + USP students' work showcased in SITE SITUATION SPECTATOR magazine 2009

THE SEVEN BRIDGES - A GUIDE TO THE SINGAPORE RIVER



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Tourism is a fascinating phenomenon: it is a distortional filter, which alters, exaggerates and censors the realities and myths of a site, presenting a caricatured impression of flattened dimensionality. As a result, an "official history" emerges, suppressing other tales and events that also took place. The Singapore River does not escape this process. The development of tours and touristic media over the years has crystallised a canon of must-see landmarks along the River, which are sites of importance in shaping Singapore's history.

What then, constitutes *importance* in history?

The Seven Bridges is an investigation into the history of miscellany and unexpectedness, delving into subverted stories and information about the Singapore River. Taking the form of a tourist brochure that is to be inconspicuously inserted into the site of the Singapore River, *The Seven Bridges* challenges the assumptions that the spectator has of touristic media along with its symbols and language. This parodic brochure inherits the glossy aesthetics and hyperbolic voice that defines the anticipated experience of the commercial tour, easing the viewer into a set of expectations. While initially being led into what seems to be a typical touristic experience, the viewer soon realises that this tour is far from *ordinary*.

The tour takes the viewer to several bridges along the River, most of which are named after British officers. The names of these bridges reference their historical past in a strictly colonial framework, which ignores the multiple perspectives and histories embedded in the site - a historical account of the bridges in touristic material would simply constitute facts on the bridge's British namesake, its date of completion and its designer or engineer.

Like these bridges, other celebrated sites and structures along the River like the Merlion and the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles are often physical expressions of glorified events in history. They are celebrated in the touristic experience to reify experience, giving these historical moments a narrative outline or a tangible visual shape,¹ which visitors can identify with. Standing along the River like badges of recognition to the masses of tourists, they become collectible "sights" which the tourist accrues like souvenirs² and quickly become a touristic

canon of sites.

A form of inversion takes place when quirky and sometimes ludicrous tales of miscellany are offered as an alternative to the monotony of these validated, official sites of tourism, taking the tourist (or the unsuspecting local) on an alternative account of the river's landmarks.

The tour is strung together with tales that challenge the 'official' perspective of the River: the multiple fables of how a sacred stone arrived on and eventually disappeared from a rocky promontory at the mouth of the Singapore River, the account of the incompetent engineer that built a bridge that was too low, the tale of the Guardian of the River, the nomadic Gardens of Peace, and more. The quasi-mythical yarns that are spun read like fiction, while based entirely on an alternative past that has never quite surfaced.

Many of the protagonists and objects that come into play in these inflated anecdotal tales become eccentric counterpoints to the characters that are commonly mentioned in the popular history of the River. We often hear of the dark-skinned coolie with muscles straining under the weight of rice sacks, the British men of authority that shaped the land around the River, the bright-eyed government officials who sought to clean the malodorous river. Instead, we are presented with the man who thought that he owned the Singapore River, the avid gardener who wanted to spread his message of "world peace" through his riverside installations, a traitor to his kingdom who was turned to stone, and wonder if there are more underlying stories and colourful personalities that belie the Singapore River.

Much like a river with many tributaries and meanders, history is never linear. We can always ask: where exactly does a river begin from? Smaller streams and rivulets skip over the land and join to form larger channels of water; these are the little histories that join to make a whole. It is the streams that have dug deeper tracks into the land that sustain and grow.

Perhaps it is possible then, to uncover the hidden streams of history that have lost their *raison d'être*, in the milieu of a capitalistic environment that has shaped the River, with the forces of tourism, into a single line that cuts across the land.

Part of this project is also exhibited at The Arts House, Singapore.

1 Y. F. Tuan, 'The Significance of the Artifact', *The Geographical Review* 70, no. 4, (1980): pp.262-272.
2 T. C. Chang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, 'The Rise of the Merlion' in Robbie B. H. Goh and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (eds.) *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2003, pp. 36-37.