A megastructure in Singapore The “Asian city of tomorrow?”

Xinyu Guan

Abstract: The People's Park Complex is one of two megastructures built in the early 1970s as prototypes for a new “Asian city of tomorrow” designed to humanize the urban expansion of Singapore through the creation of affective ensembles and connections, and would serve as an alternative to the state's forcible relocation of the population to alienating, cookie-cutter high-rise new towns. While the envisioned model of an expansive, affective urbanism failed to materialize in these megastructures, I examine how the transnational migrant and working-class communities that use the complex engage in other forms of affective placemaking that disrupt the narratives and temporalities in the state's recuperation of the surrounding old city by the state as a heritage and tourist district. I illuminate how affect can serve as an analytic to reorient a unilinear notion of architectural failure toward new temporalities, imaginations, and futurities.

Keywords: affect, architectural failure, Asian cities, gentrification, megastructures, migration, Singapore, urbanity

Built in the 1970s as a prototype for a new Asian model of urbanism, the 31-story People's Park Complex (PPC) towers above the surrounding two-story shop houses of the old city center of Singapore. The building features a series of large, volumetric spaces that open up into one another: four large, interlocking atria—one on top of another, separated by an overhanging floor, and another two on the sides. Standing in any one of these atria, one can feel the sights and sounds from the other three atria subtly percolating in from a distance; indeed, the structure was built with these sensory qualities in mind, as a massive sensory architecture. The

PPC, as well as the contemporaneous Golden Mile Complex, was conceived as a part of a total program to reimagine and humanize the rapid urban expansion of Singapore through sensory and affectual connections; the two megastructures would form nodal points out of which urban activities and sensory connections would spread out as future buildings were constructed around these focal spaces.

Decades after the construction of the two piloting megastructures, however, the envisioned sensory expansiveness and connectivities failed to materialize in the surrounding neighborhoods, and the two buildings have be-

come islands in the midst of their environs. Nevertheless, the two megastructures have become spaces for migrant and diasporic communities who create sensory connections, aspirations, and commitments, not to the immediate urban surrounds but to other locales in Asia. Yet, these communities are now under threat: the proprietors of the Golden Mile Complex have put the building up for collective sale in 2018 (Leong 2018), while negotiations are underway for the PPC to be likewise put on sale (Zaccheus and Tai 2018).

In this article, I extend the notion of architectural failure beyond the individual building—beyond the failure of individual structures to produce desired effects or maintain their physical integrity—to explore the missed potentials of two megastructures to effect changes on a larger urban level, through connections that may be physical, sensorial, or produced through human use—a failed attempt at sensory, affectual placemaking on an urban scale. My argument is that the failure of this urbanistic project cannot be comprehended without reference to other urbanistic projects and reimaginings that have taken place in the postcolonial city-state of Singapore since independence in the 1960s, especially in terms of the spaces, uses, and urban affects that these other projects have produced. I read the affective qualities of the megastructures not in isolation but in counterpoint and contrast with the affective qualities of other spaces in the same urban and national space. Then I attempt to refigure the problematic of sensory and affectual connection beyond the urban scale to a larger transnational scale of flows of people, goods, and desires.

While Pattana Kitiarsa (2014) has done an excellent ethnographic study of the Thai migrant communities in the Golden Mile Complex, little scholarly literature explicitly examines the other of the two megastructures, the People's Park Complex. In this article, I focus on the PPC in relation to the communities that use the megastructure, and in relation to the surrounding neighborhood, which has been remade as a heritage and entertainment district and re-

embedded in a national historical narrative since the late 1990s. Fieldwork and archival research were conducted between January and July 2017, and over three weeks in July 2018. This article draws from on-site observations and unstructured conversations with users of the two megastructures and the surrounding area, as well as from archival sources available at the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore.

Affect in the city

The affective qualities of urban spaces have come under greater scholarly attention in the past two decades, especially in exploring how politics unfolds in urban spaces, not just in terms of physical appropriations and expropriations of urban space but also through the affective comingling of human and nonhuman bodies, buildings, infrastructures, atmospheres, lights, sounds, and noises: for example, in the collective dynamics at ephemeral events such as rallies and demonstrations (Thrift 2004), in atmospheres in remodeled public spaces that renarrate histories and reimagine futures (Brash 2019; Wanner 2016), or in the shock and awe of large-scale infrastructural projects (Johnson 2014; Schwenkel 2013). The analytic of affect helps account for the “emergent” political effects of interactions among human and nonhuman bodies that cannot be reduced and located in any individual body (Thrift 2004: 62). In particular, Christina Schwenkel (2013), Catherine Wanner (2016), and Michał Murawski (2019), among others, have discussed the affective qualities of large-scale, state-constructed buildings and housing projects and the political effects of these material structures: they may evoke and reimagine other places and times that transcend current political regimes and borders, hence providing a way of conceptualizing and producing political futures that may not be deemed available under current political conditions.

Following in this vein, I examine an attempt in early postcolonial Singapore to re-create and revolutionize urban space through the deliber-

ate creation and fostering of affect—a project that has nonetheless failed and created partial, fragmentary spaces but in its failure has allowed for other reimaginings and projects that hark to spaces and times of otherwise. Instead of treating architectural failure as a process of failing to achieve a desired goal, as disruption in a unilinear trajectory aimed at success, I heed Hirokazu Miyazaki's call to pay attention to how failure sparks "reorientation[s]" (2017: 13) toward other goals and projects. Thinking beyond how senses and affect could be products of top-down modernist architectural design, I foreground the everyday production of sensory and affective connections by transnational communities in disrupting and reimagining narratives of national progress that are produced in the surrounding neighborhood. I subsequently turn to how the body, especially in terms of the aesthetics of bodily care, function as sites for mediating affects and reimagining social connections in this megastructural space.

Tabula rasa: High modernism

Singapore is a city-state with 5.7 million people in Southeast Asia, situated on an island of around seven hundred square kilometers on the southern tip of the Malayan Peninsula (DSS 2019). A former entrepôt and military stronghold of the British Empire, Singapore became independent as a city-state in 1965, having been expelled from the Federation of Malaysia, which it briefly joined for two years. In a port city suddenly without a hinterland, one of the first acts of state-making was for the state to nationalize and productionize the existing territory of the city-state: the Land Acquisition Act (1966) gave the state the right to compulsorily purchase land at low prices, and by the mid-1980s, the state had come to own three-quarters of the city-state's territory (Kim and Phang 2013: 127). The state adopted a "ring city" plan, modeled after the Randstad in the Netherlands, that United Nations development consultants had proposed in 1963; the plan was to spread the urbanized area

in a ring stretching across the entire island, with a central space reversed for greenery (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1027).

The state expropriated most of the nonurbanized areas outside the city center, which had up to then been mostly farmland, villages, and rainforests, to develop "new towns" (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1033) to rehouse the majority of the population in state-constructed, modernist high-rise housing estates. The apartments in these high-rises were sold to working-class families at affordable prices, which were made possible by the low cost at which the state acquired the land. A compulsory savings scheme to provide for retirement had been introduced in 1955, whereby workers were mandated to bank a certain proportion of their wages in a retirement account; Singapore citizens could purchase the state-subsidized apartments with funds from their own retirement savings account, making the apartments even more affordable (Chua 2017: 78–79). The relocation of the city-state's population of 1.8 million (Lim 1967: 39) from the crowded city center, informal settlements, and agricultural villages to high-rise modernist estates proceeded at breakneck speed: by 1987, some 87 percent of the population had been rehoused in these high-rise new towns (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1033). This relocation to the new towns was forced on residents of the old city center, rural villages, and informal settlements on the urban periphery, without their consent or input in the design process; many experienced a sense of disorientation and dislocation in their new surroundings (Lai 2010: 217), or had trouble living in high-rise buildings (Yeo 2015: 371). Nevertheless, by radically transforming the built environment and the configuration of space in Singapore, the postcolonial developmentalist state has solidified its rule in the very spaces of day-to-day life in the city-state; the provision of clean, relatively spacious apartments in green, orderly new towns has been presented by the ruling party as a material testament to the legitimacy of its model of authoritarian, technocratic governance (Chua 2017: 95–97).

A group of architects in Singapore became concerned about this undemocratic rehousing project and the anomie faced by residents of these high modernist environments; they bemoaned especially the lack of a sense of communal “identity” among residents of almost identical-looking housing estates (Lim 1967: 45). These architects set up a collective called the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) in 1965, and published various alternative proposals for this rehousing process in their journal. SPUR was led by two architects, William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon, who had trained with the Japanese Metabolist architect Fumihiko Maki at Harvard. Invoking the biological metaphor of “metabolism,” whereby individual leaves or cells could be replaced while leaving the overall structure of an organism intact, the Metabolist movement in Japan sought to create overarching urban frames, such as megastructures, which would remain intact and legible to the denizens, while individual buildings could evolve or be replaced with new ones (Lin 2010: 35). Maki, in particular, was concerned with how groups of buildings may form a humanized ensemble through related uses and sensory interconnections that mediate the experience of passing from one space to another; Maki proposed a model of urbanism in which the architect creates nodal points—such as megastructures with large internal atria—around which future structures, uses, and affects can crystallize, mediating urban expansion in a more sensuous way (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1044–1049).

The SPUR architects were inspired by this idea of humanizing the rapid urban expansion of Asian cities through nodal urbanism, and published various visionary plans for an “Asian City of Tomorrow” in SPUR’s journal: large megastructures with large internal atria featuring retail outlets and communal spaces, the upper levels featuring housing units. SPUR’s proposals were roundly ignored by the authoritarian state, which moreover forced the group to shut down in 1974 (Hava and Chan 2012: 90). The state’s suppression of SPUR perhaps reflects

more than the authoritarian state’s suspicion of independent nongovernmental associations in the Cold War era. As Kah Seng Loh notes, the very act of relocating Singapore’s populace to individuated high-rise housing blocks made possible the surveillance and control of the population, especially the hitherto residents of hitherto informal settlements on the urban periphery, where left-wing political organizing and informal mutual assistance networks in the densely built-up environment often escaped the policing of the state (2013: 87–93). The organization of state-constructed housing estates into superblock-sized “precincts” divided from each other by roads would also help the state spatially contain any insurrection, a strategy also employed in the Cold War designs of Baghdad, Islamabad, and Riyadh by Doxiadis Associates (Daechsel 2013; Menoret 2014: 69–74). SPUR’s idea of constructing a continuous built environment mediated through dense human use and affect would have presented a direct challenge to the state’s unsaid aim of creating containable urban populations.

The actually existing Asian city of tomorrow

The SPUR architects nevertheless managed to test out some of their megastructural ideas when the state demolished selected portions of the old downtown and sold the land parcels to private developers for redevelopment in 1967 (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1061). The People’s Park Complex, opened between 1970 and 1973, is a 31-story tower, with residential units on the upper 25 floors, and a massive retail complex on the bottom floors (see Figure 1). The building sits on the site of what used to be a large, open-air bazaar, the People’s Park, which had burned down in 1966; most of the vendors were relocated to a multistory market adjacent to the site (NHB 2018b). The megastructure is notable for its use of four large, interconnected, and interlocking atria, which had been inspired by Maki’s idea of the “city room,” a large indoor atrium

FIGURE 1: The People's Park Complex, exterior view (© Jodie Sun).

that allows for multiple activities to take place simultaneously, in a way visible and audible to one another, creating a sensory ensemble and engendering an affect of urbanity (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1061) (see Figures 2 and 3).

Today, the PPC mainly houses businesses catering to recent migrants from China, and to working-class Singaporeans with a more Chinese linguistic orientation—as opposed to the more English-oriented elite and middle-class of Singapore; English proficiency is seen as normative and required for most nonphysical jobs in the postcolonial nation-state. There are numerous stores selling food products from all over China, remittance agencies for sending money to China, and travel agencies selling cheap flights and package tours to China, in addition to offering visa services for Chinese citizens visiting nearby countries. There are also various shops selling mobile phones and phone cards, Chinese-language bookstores, and various business offering herbal therapies and wellness services for Chinese-oriented customers. As the earli-

est tall building in the neighborhood, the PPC formed a nucleus out of which similar buildings with large atria developed over the 1970s and 1980s in the vicinity, including the People's Park Centre (1976) (PPC 2020.) and the Chinatown Complex (1981) (NHB 2018a). Many of these structures were connected to each other with overhead walkways and other linkages, forming a sensory ensemble of working-class commercial urbanity: markets and food courts to which former street food vendors were relocated, travel agencies, and shops specializing in Chinese products and services.

Nevertheless, by the 1990s, many of the metabolic towers and the verticalized retail spaces became rather run-down or empty, losing out to newer, more popular shopping malls popping up in the suburbs. As Beng Huat Chua (2017: 107) and Gavin Shatkin note, the Singapore state not only owns most of the city-state's land but also earns land rent through real estate development companies such as Capitaland that are (at least partially) owned by the state—a

FIGURE 2: The People's Park Complex, interior view (© Jodie Sun).

situation Shatkin dubs the “real estate turn” in Asian statecraft (2017: 1). There is a constant development of new retail spaces in Singapore, and older shopping malls gradually lose out to the competition from newer shopping malls in a decade or two as they age; many of the metabolic retail spaces around Chinatown were no exception and started becoming quiet and empty by the 2000s. Only the People's Park Complex managed to retain some foot traffic, with travel agencies and supermarkets catering to working-class migrants from China; yet, much of the retail space in the large, volumetric atria appears quiet and barely patronized compared to the pedestrianized old town space. Two of the city rooms are well trafficked, one on the ground floor hosting various bookstores and mole removal shops, and another hosting a couple of large travel agencies and remittance agencies; the other two city rooms, in contrast, see much fewer people, giving the appearance of older shopping malls constructed in 1980s and 1990s Singapore that have become less popular.

The slow decline of the Metabolist spaces contrasts with the surrounding old city center, which was remade in the 2000s into a heritage district, Chinatown, that celebrates the early history of Chinese immigrants in Singapore (whose descendants make up most of the city-state's population). With a drop in tourist numbers in the 1980s and anxieties about the “heritage” and “identity” of Singapore from civil society groups, the state began to revalorize the older two- to four-story prewar row houses (“shop houses”) in the old city center, and started to earmark some streets and structures for “conservation,” turning them into spaces for celebrating ethnic heritages and histories (Chang 2016: 529). The state's efforts at conservation, rather than being merely passive, soon turned into a more active, top-down process of placemaking: older shop houses bought up by the state were leased to artists and cultural organizations, or turned into offices hosting creative industries in the 1990s (Chang 2016; Hutton 2012). This process, for which T. C. Chang proposes the

FIGURE 3: The People's Park Complex, interior view (© Jodie Sun).

term Singapore-style gentrification (2016: 524), involves the heavy initial involvement of the state in transforming old neighborhoods into art districts and aesthetic spaces as a process of curating national identities and exhibiting the state as a patron of cultural producers. This first wave of state-led heritage-oriented placemaking was soon followed by a “second wave” of artists and creative industries (536) who moved into the surrounding shop houses, attracted by the antiquated buildings, the already-present arts scene, and the growing fashionability of the neighborhood; instead of leasing from the state, they lease from private property owners and are much more vulnerable to rising rents—which are no less set in motion by this second wave itself as the neighborhood becomes more desirable. Bit by bit, Chinatown became transformed into a space for urban spectacle and touristic consumption: shop houses were converted into restaurants, boutique hotels, and souvenir shops, while many streets were re-pedestrianized, covered with glass canopies that let in sun-

light but kept out the rain, or even enveloped altogether in an air-conditioned glass structure that spans many streets.

By the 2000s, Temple Street—immediately across the street from the People's Park Complex—was transformed into a busy tourist street, lined with refurbished two-story shop houses and covered with a three-story-tall glass canopy (see Figure 4). Shop awnings and merchandize spill out onto the pedestrianized area: postcards, trinkets, restaurant tables and stools, and calligraphy shops offering to translate people's non-Chinese names into multicolored Chinese characters stylized with birds and flowers. In contrast to the surrounding old city, which was reinscribed into a national historical narrative of immigrant origins and generational progress, the verticalized, brutalist structures—modern in form but becoming less and less popular—ironically became out of place and almost anachronistic. The sensory connections of the surrounding urban space skirted around these Metabolist, volumetric spaces, instead of flow-

ing seamlessly in and out of them, as the architects had envisioned.

The remaking of the neighborhood into a marked Chinese space, moreover, cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the Singapore cityscape and official narratives of national progress and “racial harmony” in the city-state. In the state’s rhetoric, the planned, orderly suburban new towns not only represent the state’s provision of affordable housing and amenities to the citizenry, but also help integrate the different ethnic groups that make up Singapore: 75 percent Chinese, 17 percent Malays, and 7 percent Indian when the city-state became independent (Chua 2017: 128). Quotas regulating apartment sales ensure a proportionate representation of each ethnic group in each apartment block—a measure that is nonetheless much more onerous on minority groups in restricting choices on where one can purchase an apartment, compared with the majority Chinese-descended population (148). Moreover, the sleek, modernist designs of the housing blocks themselves avoid

any overt ethnic markers or architectural motifs that may be associated with specific Asian traditions. The relocation of the population from more ethnically marked neighborhoods such as Chinatown, Little India, or Kampong Glam in the old city center to the more mixed, less ethnically marked housing blocks of the new towns also inscribes a trajectory of nation-building and ethnic integration in the historical time of the nation.

It is in contrast to the new towns that neighborhoods in the old city—Chinatown, Little India, and Kampong Glam—become recuperated as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1996) in the time of the nation, a past that forms the backdrop to the subsequent progress of the nation-state. With various plaques and signposts, the old alleyways and two-story shop houses of Chinatown have been recast as a site of origination for Singaporeans descended from migrants from China in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, who make up the majority of the city-state’s population. New sites commemorating the Chi-

FIGURE 4: Temple Street, across the garden bridge from the People’s Park Complex (© Jodie Sun).

nese heritage of the neighborhood have sprung up, including the Chinatown Heritage Center, a museum detailing the lives and struggles of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese migrants to Singapore, cast as the “pioneers” of Singapore (CHC 2020). The museumification and historicization of this neighborhood—projecting a Chinese Singaporean identity onto the past life of a nostalgic Chinatown that is now lost—contrasts with the continued inhabitation of the neighborhood by more recent (post-1990s) immigrants from China to Singapore, who struggle with xenophobia from locally born Chinese Singaporeans (Ang 2016). Mostly making use of the less-popular interior spaces of the PPC, rather than the more commercialized open-air spaces of the old city streets, the immigrant communities become invisibilized in a historical narrative that places the old city streets of Chinatown squarely in the national past and the suburban new towns as the present and future.

Transnational cartographies and sensory connections

Despite being marginalized in the surrounding neighborhood and its narratives of national progress, the People’s Park Complex nonetheless functions as a space for the transaction of transnational goods and services, for acts of imagination that connect to and mobilize other spaces beyond the immediate surroundings of Chinatown to which the megastructure is physically connected. I draw on Henri Lefebvre’s insight on how space is socially “produced,” not just through top-down urbanistic planning or architectural design but also through everyday practices, rituals, and connections that are lived affectively through by a variety of users of urban space: residents, business owners, patrons, among others (1991: 38–39). David Miller (2001), Martin Malanansan (2006), Panikos Panayi (2008) and Alex Rhys-Taylor (2013) emphasize the role commodities, foodways, and other sensory or affective material forms medi-

ate the transnational connections, making, unmaking, or remaking diasporic identities in the process. In this section, I counterpoise the failed project of fostering affective connections on an urbanistic and architectural level, on the one hand, with the sensory and affective connections that transnational migrant communities forge within the megastructure, on the other hand; in forging affective connections with multiple transnational elsewheres, the present-day use of the space goes beyond the problematic of creating a new, interconnected urban space for a new nation-state, and disrupts the framing and mobilization of the neighborhood for an exclusionary historical narrative of national progress.

Weeks before the Lunar New Year, a yearly festival where many East and Southeast Asians visit their families and share a meal together, the walls and shop fronts of various small, one-room travel agencies become bedecked with colored pieces of A4 paper, each printed with the name of a different Chinese city and the price of a plane ticket to said destination. The entrance to the complex on the ground floor is also lined with various street food stands selling delicacies—snail broth noodles, steamed buns, pancakes—from parts of China from which more recent working-class migrants to Singapore hail, as opposed to the foodways of specific parts of coastal Southern China to which most Chinese Singaporeans trace their descent. Beyond the promises of reaching home (or at least getting a taste of it), other small businesses propose alternative cartographies and imaginings of transnational space: a shoe store on an overhead walkway in one of the city rooms features a footwear shop with the sign FRANCE, but the letter F is stylized after the Facebook logo, playful scrambling the codes that guarantee the place-bound authenticity of transnational commodity desires.

The transnational desire and its remapping take place not only in the high-visibility spaces of the city rooms but also in hidden nooks and crannies in the megastructure: a lone staircase hangs from the very top of one of the city rooms, leading from an overhead walkway al-

most suspended midair on the fourth floor to a lone, nondescript door on the fifth floor. Taking the staircase up to the fifth floor, I saw a sign, printed on an A4 piece of paper, with the words “Chinese Supermarket” in Chinese and an arrow pointing ahead. Following the signs, I passed through a deliriously hot parking garage—heated up by skylights that nonetheless did not let any air pass through—before arriving at a grocery store, with no visible name at the entrance. The store featured shelves and shelves of prepackaged food products from specific locales in China—instant snail broth noodles from Guangxi, spicy tofu from Sichuan, pickles from Shanxi—arranged in no particular order; some of the products on the shelves were still in the cardboard boxes that were opened on one side. The store, with a stripped-down, pop-up aesthetic, corresponded in location, as I later discovered, to a row of windows at the top of one of the city rooms with a bright red-and-yellow sign that read, “Finest goods from China; tastes from the homeland”—a sign, how-

ever, that gave no indication of where the store in question was actually located.

Despite the unassuming appearance of the premises, the store stocked quite a large range of food products and became rather busy on the few weekends I visited (but not on weekdays when I visited). By the cashier's was a whiteboard that read, "I would like ____ from my hometown" in Chinese on the top, and "We will try to satisfy your demands by every means!" at the bottom (see Figure 5); the board was covered with scribbles in marker pen of the names of various food products: specific brands or types of yogurt, tofu, plum pickles, or soy sauce. Other scribbles on the whiteboard, however, pertain to social relations: "my girlfriend," read one such post—although I have never ever seen mentions of "boyfriends," even on subsequent visits. Beyond the strict logics of exchange, of the commodification of homesickness and foodways, the whiteboard absorbs the ostensibly "free" "immaterial labor" of the migrant patrons, in the collective creation of affect that extends

FIGURE 5: The whiteboard in the Chinese supermarket (© Jodie Sun).

beyond acts of exchange, a public manifestation of collective “dream[ing]” (Brash 2019: 323). Yet, such acts of dreaming perhaps points toward deep ambiguities behind the affirmation of ties in transnational space: what would it mean for someone to call upon this business to bring their “girlfriend”—a playful challenge to the store that acknowledges the impossibility for commodities to compensate for real persons (even as commodities help affirm ties to these persons, as Miller (2001) notes)? Or, perhaps more troublingly, is the person who wrote that note comparing their girlfriend to a commodity among others—comparing her to a food product, objectifying her, and disavowing her personhood and agency?

One floor above the Chinese supermarket and the parking garage is the roof of the six-story commercial space of the People’s Park Complex, with the slender 25-story residential component of the megastructure towering above. An open expanse paved with tarmac, the roof has markings on the ground suggesting it could be used as a parking space, although on my various visits, I have never seen a single car parked in that space; compared to the sheltered parking space on the fifth floor, the roof is too exposed to the sun. Nevertheless, the open area of the roof offers a good panoramic view of the surrounding Chinatown and the skyline of the downtown area, as well as a close-up glimpse of the iconic tower of the megastructure above. In the daytime, groups of young people frequently drop by the space to do photo shoots with the views of the old town as the backdrop. More notable on the roof was a bar, Lepark, a “hipster” bar known for attracting a fashionable, cosmopolitan, middle-class crowd, and an “edible garden” occupying a small corner of the roof adjacent to the bar; the bar perhaps represents a little fragment of the “second wave” of businesses remaking of Chinatown into a hip neighborhood that found its way up onto an unusual location: not a prewar shop house but the roof of a modernist building (Chang 2016: 536).

These alternative spaces are nevertheless vulnerable to the property market, as the afore-

mentioned “second wave” (Chang 2016: 536) of the “Singapore-style gentrification” (524) of Chinatown increasingly transforms the neighborhood into a desirable locale and raises rents. Lepark announced its closure in September 2017, having been displaced by the sale of the two-story parking space—which includes the bar and rooftop space—by the building management for redevelopment (Toh 2017). Rather than providing a nucleus out of which affect and sensory connections spread, the PPC has ironically come under pressure from the outside, from the gentrification of Chinatown in the surrounding neighborhood—being dictated to rather than dictating the terms under which such connections are made. The collective sale of the building that is now mooted by the proprietors (Zaccheus and Tai 2018) perhaps not only is the latest iteration of such a process but also could mark the final failure of the megastructure to engender its own affects and imaginations of other spaces and times.

Bodies in time

Rather than reading the People’s Park Complex as temporarily holding off a creeping but inevitable process of gentrification, as awaiting its final failure, I now turn to how figures of the body and the aesthetics of bodily care could point toward other temporalities and rhythms. Drawing on Achille Mbembe (2004) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2006), I examine the intertwining of the materiality of bodies, their representations, and their absences, and center the body as a site for colonial abjection, as well as for acts of care and self-making, following Judith Farquhar’s (2002), David Palmer’s (2007) and Angela Zito’s (2014) discussions, among others, of how bodies and acts of bodily care are used to narrate histories and negotiate everyday temporalities in Sino-phone contexts.

In the old city streets of Chinatown, one encounters various bodily figures of abject Chinese bodies from the colonial era, which anchor a historical narrative of national progress, the fleshy

materiality of the bodily figures having been petrified, or made absent (but still alluded to), as a performance of the overcoming of colonial-era abjection in the national present. Outside the Chinatown Heritage Center on Temple Street is a prominent metal statue of a Samsui woman, one of the migrant female laborers from southern China (especially the town of Samsui/Sanshui in the Pearl River Delta) who migrated to Singapore in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: squatting on the ground in a crouching position and her nondescript face almost subserviently lowered toward the ground, the statue is painted in a monochrome dark gray, except for her bright red, triangular headdress—that which identifies her as a Samsui woman—which points diagonally upward toward the viewer standing in front of her. The woman appears to have gotten in position to carry a heavy load on her back, but the load is not shown, and the entire laboring body seems to have been sequestered under the bright red signifier of the headdress—the worn-down, self-sacrificing body of the past having been superseded and petrified into the signifiers of national history. As Kevin Low notes, the figure of the Samsui woman has been appropriated as paragons of industriousness and self-sacrifice in children's books and other narrative of the national past (2015: 86–87). The women are moreover often romanticized today as “having taken a vow of celibacy,” due to a conflation of this group of women with other groups of female workers in nineteenth-century Southern China who did take such a vow (43); such an idealization of women as disavowing one's own sexuality cannot be divorced from patriarchal anxieties over the sexuality of working and mobile women—particularly given the anxiety over the sexuality of migrant women from China in Singapore today, cast as a threat to Singapore-born, heterosexual, Chinese families (Ang 2016).

Nearby, on Sago Lane, an informational plaque informs the visitor that the lane used to be known as the “Street of the Dying” by the Chinese, for the houses along the street once housed Chinese migrant coolies who had no

family in Singapore at the last stage of their lives. There are no more fragile, dying bodies to be seen on this street today, having been converted into one of the more mundane streets of Chinatown lined with businesses, and despite the general unwillingness of Chinese Singaporeans to be associated with signifiers of death, the state has decided to put up this information panel—mobilizing the specter of abject bodies in the past to highlight the progress that had taken place in the city-state.

This heritage district is nonetheless directly connected to the PPC via a landscaped garden bridge, which opens up, through a nondescript side entrance, to a quiet, dimly lit city room that houses businesses for the care of the body that serve a mostly Chinese-speaking, working-class clientele: a couple of massage parlors clustered around an L-shaped hallway seem to be the busiest, with shop attendants hanging out by the shop front. A panoply of advertisements depicting various bodily treatments fill a row of back windows facing the atrium: a hair removal center displays a large picture of a confident woman, while a foot reflexology center has put up a diagram of pressure points on the soles of one's feet. Nearby, a clinic offers treatment for piles (anal hemorrhoids), displaying graphic photos of large, fleshy hemorrhoids that have grown on people's anuses on the shop window.

In contrast to figures of bodily abjection across the street—fixed in bronze in a national past, or superseded and negated in their very absence—the businesses found in the interior of the People's Park Complex exhibit the fleshy materiality of the body as an ongoing site of care and present-day renegotiation. Indeed, other businesses offer services of negotiating futures through bodily techniques: near the ground floor entrance of the PPC are also various mole removal shops, each prominently displaying diagrams of different positions where moles could grow on the human face (see Figure 6); each possible position corresponds to a positive or negative outlook in life or character trait—“honest/dishonest,” “will be lucky/unlucky,” “bad for one's wife/husband,” “will have a long/short life”—

FIGURE 6: A mole position chart (© Xinyu Guan).

and the removal of moles would help one re-chart one's future. Yet, it is important not to romanticize the futures that such bodily practices present as radical futures that break from the power dynamics of the present: there are separate mole position charts for men and for women, with different positions for the moles—reinforcing a gender binary on the level of the body—and with heteronormative assumptions about life courses; the man's face would have

mole positions that say “good/bad for one's wife,” while the woman's face would have those that say “good/bad for one's husband.”

On the one hand, the interior spaces of the PPC form an enveloping atmosphere and aesthetic of bodily care and bodily rechartings of the future that contrast with the mobilizations of object or spectral bodies in the fixing of a national history of progress in the remade *lieux de mémoire* on the adjacent old city streets; these

practices and aesthetics of the body, like the transnational flows of foodways and aspirations, point to ways of reimagining time, space, and the body that disrupt the narrations of history, progress, and nostalgia in the remade Chinatown that surrounds the megastructure. On the other hand, nevertheless, the gendered terms under which futurities are negotiated (in the case of the mole removal businesses), and the gendered figures that seem to blur into transnational food commodities (the “girlfriend” alluded to on the whiteboard) perhaps echo the gendered terms under which the body of the Samsui woman is abjected and petrified into a monument to a patriarchal national history across the road. The everyday productions of space in the PPC may invoke other times and futurities beyond the nation-state and its narrations of time, but such times and futurities nonetheless do not represent a break from gender binaries, heteronormativity, or gendered anxieties about women.

Conclusion

In this article, I have used affect as an analytic to interrogate the concept of architectural failure, specifically by looking at a project that attempted to create a new urbanistic space for a burgeoning postcolonial city through affect—an attempt that has nonetheless failed because of (1) the mismatch between such a project and the state’s unstated Cold War-era imperative of creating containable, policeable, urban spaces; (2) the obsolescence of built forms in a city that is constantly revamping and reimagining its retail spaces; and more recently, (3) the re-making of Chinatown as a desirable, aesthetic neighborhood by both the state and the artists and creative industries that followed. Contrary to visions for an overflowing, expansive urbanism, the People’s Park Complex has materialized instead in a series of enclosed, fugitive spaces, little communities contained in their concrete shells and not having much to do with each other. Nevertheless, it is in these partitioned, en-

closed volumes that various migrant and working-class communities, through their sensory and affective appropriations and productions of space, reimagined and actualized transnational connectivities, other temporality and futures, away from the nostalgic and touristic recuperation of the old city streets of Chinatown as the zero point of national progress.

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Xinyu Guan is a third-year PhD Student in Anthropology at Cornell University. His research focuses on race, sexuality, and queerness in Singapore, especially how mobilizations along these axes play out in the built environment in Singapore and displace the terms under which democratic politics are imagined in contemporary Singapore. He has a BA in Comparative Literature from Columbia University and an MSc in Urban Studies from University College London.

Email: xg257@cornell.edu

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