

# CONTEMPORARY ARTS AS POLITICAL PRACTICE IN SINGAPORE

EDITED BY WERNMEI YONG ADE AND LIM LEE CHING

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## “Neighbors”: A Tiong Bahru Series

*Jessie Morgan-Owens and James Owens*

**Abstract** In this artist’s statement, Jessie Morgan-Owens and James Owens of the photography team Morgan & Owens explain how the politics of embodiment in the formation of a cohesive local identity impacted a series of portraits they made in Tiong Bahru, a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of historical significance to postcolonial Singapore. Part of a larger body of images, the Tiong Bahru Series photographs capture the people who dwell within this shifting landscape. In the course of their work, the photographers discovered that the district’s charm depended on its dynamics of collocation across diverse groups—a dynamic necessarily challenged by rising rents, commoditization and preservation-by-design in the world’s wealthiest nation. Many individuals who call Tiong Bahru home “embraced and reactivated” the new “social life of the interior” (Owens, in this volume), as the marketplace and public space around them shifted, while others moved deeper into the interior or left altogether. This project brought home to the photographers just how

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much lived experience in Singapore requires that individuals make personal negotiations between its inborn transience and its historical permanence of place.

Tiong Bahru, the earliest pre-war government housing estate to survive Singapore's boom, transformed from relic to "happening" in about 18 short months, from mid-2010 through 2011. Following government designation as a historical district in late 2003, taste-makers, conservationists, expatriates and creatives quickly moved into the area. Today, a slew of articles, travel guides and foodie blogs will point to Tiong Bahru as Singapore's hippest district. Singaporean national media has closely followed the phenomenon of Tiong Bahru, reporting in such articles as "Newfound hip factor comes at a price" that rents on the "ugly" side street Yong Siak will be raised by 75 % next year.<sup>1</sup>

The common wisdom is that this rapid gentrification is thanks to three factors: first, the establishment of new neighboring communities in private condominiums and new Housing Development Board buildings constructed that year, bringing with them tens of thousands of new neighbors and customers for the enclave; second, the installation of key community-building small businesses—the bookstore, the café, the bakery and so on—to serve this new and old clientele. These small "Western" businesses entered a scene already packed with favorite old-style eateries and a food center with *die die must try* stalls for traditional food. Third, efforts to preserve the historical character of Tiong Bahru's distinctive architecture play a starring role in its renaissance. With its art deco charm, quirky apartments, wide plant-filled walkways, rounded balconies and stairwells, and community gardens, Tiong Bahru offers a visual feast.

As residents of this tiny beautiful enclave of about 1000 families during this transitional period, we witnessed this transformation firsthand. We turned to portraiture to capture the effects of rapid change on our neighbors. In meeting them, we discovered the district's charm depends on a dynamic of co-location across diverse groups—a dynamic that will necessarily be challenged by rising rents, commoditization and preservation-by-design in the world's wealthiest nation. Would it be possible to maintain a cohesive local identity in the face of so much change?

I should note here that we ourselves embodied the politics of gentrification. As Americans, we were the "expat artists" who would move into the

neighborhood in the years after the neighborhood achieved conservation status, and we would leave two years later in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Our presence in the neighborhood, as expatriate Americans—otherwise known as "*ang moh*" (Hokkien slang meaning "red-haired," used as a racial epithet for white)—was seen by some as an indicator of the changing face of the neighborhood. We heard from our neighbors, within the first months of our lease, that real estate agents had begun advertising that "travel photographers from New York" had moved into 78 Moh Guan Terrace. It would not be the first time that our race, occupation and country of origin would be taken for shorthand to signify our belonging to a political or social class or, for that matter, to signify a potential conferring of class. Walking through our neighborhood one day, we overheard a tour guide explain that "expats" now made up the majority of the residents in our building, and our interest was responsible for both the rising rents and the new restaurants. We decided to explore this question of our own culpability by applying our skills of photographic portraiture.

In early March 2011, we distributed flyers explaining the project—to photograph the current population of Tiong Bahru in their homes—by dropping hundreds of postcards into local mailboxes, one building at a time. The flyers announced: "Jessie and James are looking for residents and families currently living and working in Tiong Bahru to participate in a cultural portrait project. We are photographing residents of the neighborhood to create an artistic and cultural catalogue of life in Tiong Bahru today." The postcards invited our neighbors to be photographed in their homes in exchange for one A3-sized archival photographic print. Our initial goal was 40 portraits, and we hoped our catalogue would be as inclusive as possible. We recognized that there would be limitations of time, language and culture. Our first obstacles: to overrule self-negation in our subjects ("they don't mean me") and to expand beyond a self-selected minority of early responders ("pick me!"). Our postcard included this invitation: "Who can participate? Everyone! We would like this to be an all-inclusive project, and we've had some wonderful neighbors join the project so far. Who is in the photograph is up to you: singles, couples, families...all are welcome. The portrait can be in your home or outside, or anyplace you love in Tiong Bahru." Postcard distribution was staggered—one building at a time—so that our schedule would not be overwhelmed at once.

<sup>2</sup>The Urban Redevelopment Authority granted conservation status to 20 blocks built in the 1930s by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in December 2003.

<sup>1</sup>*The Straits Times*, Melody Zaccheus, 15 November 2013.



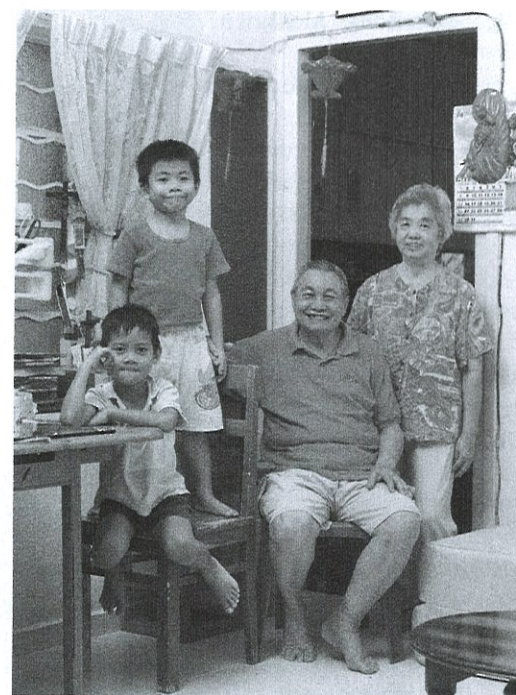
Fig. 8.1 Charles Wee Hian Guan



After an initial round of portraits were accomplished, we began looking for ways to expand the subject pool. To reach and engage the elderly population, for whom we faced language and technology barriers, we set up a booth at the hawker center on the second floor of the local food market to meet potential subjects and to give them an opportunity to meet us. When this met with limited response, we began working through bilingual members of the local community, who befriended us and introduced us to their friends and parents. At the invitation of one local community leader, we made appearances at a Tai Chi group that meets at the community center at dawn. Following exercise, and with the translation help of the instructors, we explained our project and organized volunteers; in exchange, we made their official group portrait and distributed free prints for their organization.

Through these efforts we were able to photograph four families that had been in Tiong Bahru since the 1940s. Of these, Mr. Charles Wee Hian Guan (Fig. 8.1) had lived in Tiong Bahru the longest, since 1947, closely followed by Simon and Bernadette Parvi, who were lifelong residents in their eighties, shown here with their grandsons, Luke and Mark (Fig. 8.2).

Fig. 8.2 Simon and Bernadette Parvi, with Mark and Luke



Madame Song Monk Geok invited us into her home to photograph after Tai Chi. She and her late husband had moved into the apartment shortly after their marriage 42 years ago and raised their 6 children there. Hers was the only original kitchen we photographed (Fig. 8.3). Three generations of the Oei family were also photographed in their kitchen, where they admitted that they spend most of their time.<sup>3</sup> Ting Oei, who is our age, reached out to us to be a part of the project: with her son James, the family has lived in the apartment for five generations.

Over a period of eight months, we photographed residents who responded to our advertisement in their homes. We talked to them about their experiences in the changing Tiong Bahru. At that time, while we were photographing, "tourists" from other parts of Singapore were often visitors to our enclave. A short film called "Civic Life" was filmed in the Tiong Bahru Food Centre, featuring 100 local residents as actors and

<sup>3</sup>The Oei family has declined to give consent to publish their photograph.



Fig. 8.3 Song Monk  
Geok



extras. An installation and art exhibition called “Open House” was staged inside a handful of apartments. An “inside/outside” dynamic persists among the residents, demonstrated by the pride of place evident in these images and participation in these art and documentary projects. With a lay-person’s anthropological curiosity, we recorded conversations with our subjects during the hour or so we spent together making these portraits. Those conversational recordings form the backbone of this essay and the conclusions we have drawn from this project.

### PROJECT FINDINGS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

While we aimed to capture a cross-section of identities in the neighborhood, our assumptions in this regard bear deeper observation. This artist statement will attempt to identify and recount key factors of influence on the project: namely, the architecture, language barriers, local institutions

(both new and old) and invisible populations. In looking over the portraits and footage, three themes emerge:

First, the small, warren-like architecture of the buildings was transformative on both the closeness of the portraiture in the moment of photographing and the experiences of the residents there. The 20 buildings considered as part of the historic district were built beginning in 1936 and have an art deco style. They are up to five stories tall, with small apartments of three to five rooms each, and always only one bathroom. Many of the apartments have been tastefully renovated; some that retained their original layout have an outdoor kitchen or bathroom (or both). The name Tiong Bahru is a typically Singaporean mash-up meaning “new cemetery”: the Hokkien dialect word for “cemetery” put together with the Malay word for new. The age of these apartments, their size, the opportunities for gardening and the small-town, or Malay, “kampung” or village feel to the district add to the allure for modern Singaporeans, whose homes are likely to be apartments high in tower blocks. A walk through Tiong Bahru indulges, for Singaporeans, in a very specific, and local, flavor of nostalgia.

Secondly, far more residents were “original” to the neighborhood, having resided there for three generations, or in the case of the Oei family, five generations, than the media would have us believe. Some of our subjects had just moved in, but others had lived in the neighborhood a lifetime. These “original” residents moved in or stayed in the area through the three decades of crime and overcrowding that typified Tiong Bahru life, and Singaporean life more generally, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. They stayed and raised families in these small flats, and now their children (or children’s children) find themselves in possession of a real estate goldmine.

Rapid development has put elderly residents and small business owners in a vulnerable position. Mom & Pop stores and provision shops have closed their doors. Meanwhile, the bookstore, Books Actually, and the espresso bar, 40 Hands, drew new communities into their orbit, before finding themselves threatened by rising costs. The social life of the neighborhood that generates its appealing nostalgia and community feel requires the institutions that support and gather people together. In short, many individuals who call Tiong Bahru home have seen the social life of the interior displaced as the markets and public spaces around them have shifted.

By March of 2012, we had photographed 67 people and 24 homes in Tiong Bahru. Kelvin Ang, a conservationist with the Urban Redevelopment Authority who lives and works in a flat in Tiong Bahru, estimated in 2012 for “Open House” that on his street, about 60 % of



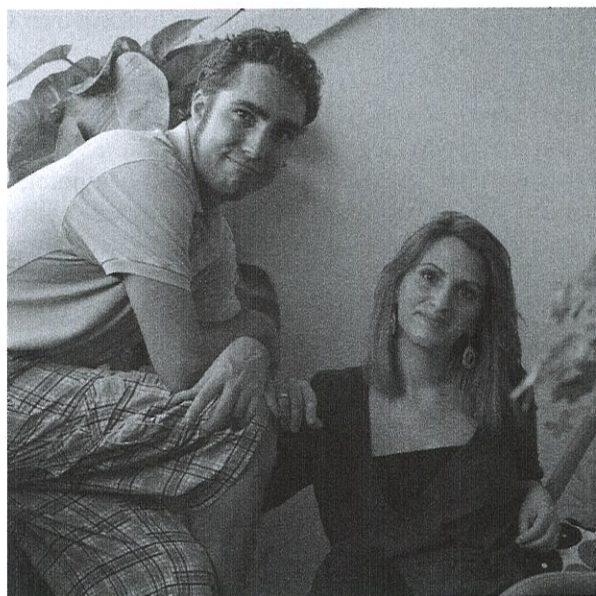


Fig. 8.4 Pierre Vuillet and Clement Coralie

residents are old residents, and 40 % are newcomers.<sup>4</sup> This distribution also accurately describes our initial group of subjects. The majority of our subjects had lived in Tiong Bahru for ten years or more. Four subjects had been in the neighborhood less than one year; among the Singaporean newcomers, two remembered visiting the area as children. The “expat” population of Tiong Bahru, a term used almost exclusively to refer to Western and white residents, reflected percentages among the wider population. Of our subjects, there was only one other “expat” couple, Pierre and Coco (Fig. 8.4), who, like us, were just passing through. The other four “expats” had married into local families, like Bridget and Alan (Fig. 8.5), and they bought their apartments with Singaporean spouses and partners. More frequently we met people who had immigrated to

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by an essay by Adeline Chia, “Out with the Old” included in a publication, “Neighborhood,” for the art installation “Open House—Occupy Tiong Bahru,” exhibited February 2012, p. 11.

Fig. 8.5 Soon family

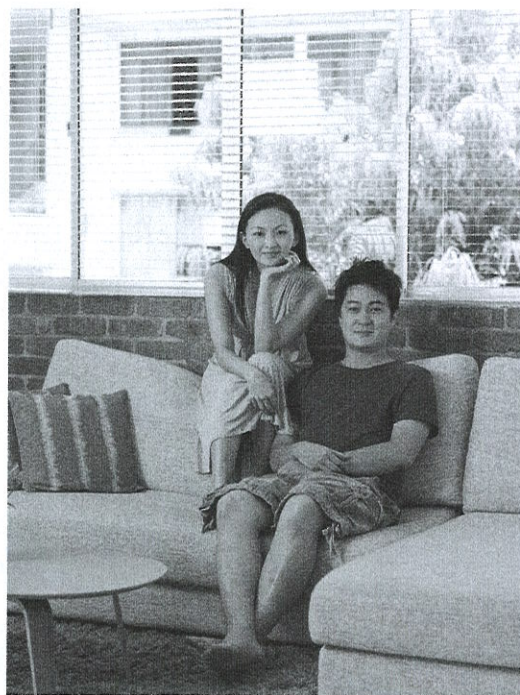


Singapore from Manila, Hong Kong and Malaysia, which brings me to my third point: we can see—and catalogue—in these images local, queer, aging, expat, middle-class, mixed race, pregnant, dying and young bodies. Not every moment of life as experienced in Tiong Bahru is spent gentrifying and patronizing the cafes. Two families among our subjects also let us know that they were pregnant in their pictures, after the project was complete. One of our subjects, the actress Emma Yong (Fig. 8.6), shown here with her husband Jerry, succumbed to cancer shortly after our project ended. Two of the couples pictured were newlyweds.

What the project fails to capture are another group of immigrants who have long called Tiong Bahru home: the workers who live in illegal dormitories hidden throughout the estate. These invisible bodies were a topic of many of our portrait conversations. Tiong Bahru is home to groups of visiting workers from China and the Philippines, and their dormitory style living arrangements meet a gap in the housing market: only Singaporeans and Permanent Residents can live in public housing. While



**Fig. 8.6** Emma Yong and Jerry Lim



some employers provide housing allowances or dormitories, all others must pay escalating rents out of a low-wage pocket. Singaporean law treats such arrangements harshly, and if discovered, will “bust” any non-family living arrangement of more than eight persons. The punishment for overstaying a visa to Singapore, or entering illegally, is caning, followed by a jail sentence and deportation.<sup>5</sup> These residents, many of them at risk, are careful to keep a low profile and to keep the number of people in a flat at any given time below the minimum.

<sup>5</sup> Singapore’s Immigration Act, 15.3 “Unlawful Entry of Presence in Singapore,” states that persons staying in Singapore unlawfully for less than 90 days, upon conviction, are subject to a fine not exceeding \$4000 and/or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding 6 months. For persons who remain in Singapore unlawfully for longer than 90 days, the punishment upon conviction is imprisonment for a period not exceeding 6 months, and if not excepted due to restrictions of age, health or gender, the prisoner will be punished with caning of not less than three strokes. Persons who meet age, health or gender restrictions will pay a fine not exceeding \$6000, in lieu of caning.

**Fig. 8.7** Gabriel Victor Cabarello and Jose de la Cruz



In each apartment block that we photographed, our subjects would gossip in hushed voices about the workers living in another part of the building. In our building, the workers lived directly upstairs. We hardly ever saw our neighbors come or go, but we heard them. They would arrive home in shifts accompanied by the sound of cooking, washing up, and showers, at all hours of the night and day. In one instance, our subjects admitted that the previous tenants, before they moved in, had been workers. Eight people had lived in the room where we photographed Gabriel and Jose (Fig. 8.7). This represents an extraordinary shift in a neighborhood’s dynamics.

### WHY PORTRAITS?

Ours was not the first artistic or photographic endeavor to focus on Tiong Bahru, and it is unlikely to be the last. However, the strategy of photographing portraits, in the environment of the sitters, was unique to our



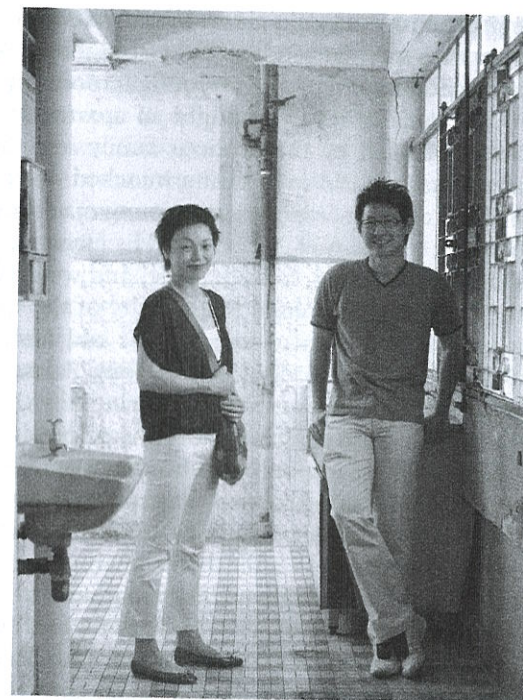
project at that time. We chose to make portraits, as opposed to candid street photography or architectural imagery, for its power to demonstrate the embodiment of gentrification and change, as events in the history of a neighborhood living through transition. In portraiture, each subject becomes a type, or a representative, of the class, race, gender, national identity that the *viewer* ascribes to the portrait. For example, in Lauren Greenfield's photographs of French aristocracy and wealthy American families, both the gender and class of the subjects are imprecated in our ability to understand and correctly "read" the photograph. With her portraits of wealthy teenagers, the subjects' class and ages are factors productive of an extraordinary volume of meaning. Environments can indicate a keen politics of identity, and the portrait demonstrates embodiment within that environment. Thus, the camera opens up a wide field of meaning-making that, we hoped, would illuminate this site of significant social change.

When a neighborhood becomes "hip," the environment of that neighborhood changes alongside. To casual onlookers, "uncles" eating Bak Kut Teh or selling durian become a part of the nostalgic charm of a place where—quite unironically, I would add—they also live. This is also true of the newcomers, queer couples, "hipsters" and expats, whom observers point to as signifying a range of clichés about gentrification.

In our opinion, portraiture is an antidotal and anecdotal form of sustained observation that cuts through cliché, when made with care and attention. In an effort to demonstrate lives as lived and embodied in a place, we have photographed portraits of people in dozens of countries and cities, including our own. Our 12 years of experience has taught us this: to make a portrait you must engage with the subject as a neighbor or friend. While images made from a distance with a long lens are informative, they do not inform upon the subject, only the place. To have the power to inform upon the lives of subjects, photographers must spend the time it takes to make a portrait in conversation, and further, they have to extend the hand of time, interest and solicitude for the person in the frame. Without engagement, the project fails.

The moment of photographing was edged between conversations and stories. The images were made collaboratively, that is, the subjects helped us to choose the site, focus and subjects of their images. Each portrait was afforded two hours in the schedule. Most lasted about 40 minutes from introduction to wrap. However, the relationships built around the portrait took even longer to develop, as we discussed, scheduled, staged, photographed, processed and distributed the images.

Fig. 8.8 Chin Yen and Esther Chow



#### ARCHITECTURE AND HERITAGE

Among the new residents of Tiong Bahru, those who had recently purchased and renovated properties, that process was foremost in their conversation. Yen and Esther, young professionals who had recently bought a flat in a pre-war building (Fig. 8.8), expressed their love for the apartment as an expression of their desire to find community and heritage in modern-day Singapore. Here's Yen:

We're glad that there are younger people like us—[glad] that it's not just us or just a few of us—but a group of [young people] who are interested in keeping the heritage here. It's kind of comforting to know. Singapore is always supposed to be new, "what's the latest and greatest?" But it's good that we're keeping this heritage.

Later in the portrait session, Yen teased that "our segment" of the market was so defined that we all "aspired to the same refrigerator," a nostalgic



and expensive model sold in bright reds and yellows that they could see from their kitchen window in their neighbors' kitchens. Even so, we found a remarkable variety of new configurations inside these flats.

Yen and Esther had bought an apartment in a post-war flat that had been occupied by the previous family since construction. Esther recognized that the old man sitting hunched on the couch, about to move in with his children, was the same young man shown in his wedding portraits, hanging on the wall above him. His furniture left imprints on the floor, a shadow of the bed, bedside table, and wardrobe. As we photographed in the kitchen, Yen praised the tenacity of the earlier generation. "They just used things until they wore out" he said admiringly.

Like so many modern icons, Tiong Bahru draws meaning from its origin story. The pre-war blocks were built by the Singaporean Improvement Trust (SIT) in cooperation with the colonial British government. The SIT was founded in response to a housing commission which called for affordable public housing to meet Singapore's acute housing crisis. Tiong Bahru was its pilot project, begun in 1935. The famed Samsui women, known as "red bandannas," after their signature uniform, helped construct these buildings. These single women emigrated from China to Singapore in the 1930s under a vow of celibacy. They formed close-knit groups that worked in construction, building Singapore's housing with traditional methods. The small tile mosaics these women constructed are particularly prized, as are the iron grill-works that still frame many of the estate's windows.

During the war, Tiong Bahru became a safe haven for Chinese communities threatened by Japanese occupation. The district's back entrances and exterior staircases make Tiong Bahru a particularly good place to hide, and the population of the estate doubled. In the years before the war, the place had been too expensive for most Singaporean Chinese; instead, it was the fashionable residence of mistresses and "second wives" of upper-class men, known as the "Den of Beauties" or *mei ren wo*. In 1955, the food market opened, staging a successful experiment in relocating roaming hawker stalls in a fixed place, complete with wet and fresh market. In 1961, the neighboring "kampong," or squatter village at Bukit Ho Swee, suffered a devastating fire that left thousands homeless. Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party, who had established the Housing Development Board in response to housing demand in 1960, picked up in Tiong Bahru where the SIT had left off.<sup>6</sup> The resulting post-war blocks, nestled alongside

<sup>6</sup>Singapore's National Library provides a short history of Tiong Bahru's construction at: [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1700\\_2010-08-11.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1700_2010-08-11.html). Accessed Oct 15, 2015.

existing Art Deco structures, form a visual argument intended to testify to a successful postcolonial transition and a new ruling party whose priority is the housing of an entire population. Today about 82 % of Singaporeans live in "HDB" or Housing Development Board flats.<sup>7</sup> In December of 2003, the 20 remaining blocks of pre-war flats, constructed by SIT, were given conservation status. Tiong Bahru estate would be protected and preserved from the massive redevelopment going on around them.

In our experience of Singaporean nostalgia, images and tokens of life in Tiong Bahru from the 1940s and 1950s predominate. The visual argument we hoped to make was that, while the past fascinates, Tiong Bahru's hey-day may in fact be right now. "We've seen a lot of Tiong Bahru's past—in old photographs" our website explained to new subjects, "but we must allow for today's Tiong Bahru to become a part of that tradition." "Open House: Occupy Tiong Bahru," an art exhibition and happening taking place inside a handful of flats in February 2012, produced a journal to accompany the event that makes a similar argument. In his introduction Alan Oei, the curator, explains:

We'd like you to know there's so much more to Tiong Bahru. The Art Deco buildings aren't shorthands for nostalgia; the old folks aren't there to manifest the clash of the old and new. These are real people, with real lives lived.

Things change. [Open House] is part of the gentrification process. But at the very least, let's uncover some of the stories that haven't been told in the race to anoint this place as the hippest neighborhood in Asia—to say, 'This was Tiong Bahru in 2012. Sort of.'

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This project brought home to us just how much lived experience in Singapore requires that we make personal negotiations between its inborn transience and its historical permanence of place. Place index finger to index finger, and thumb to thumb, and two hands form the shape of the city-state. Inside this diamond play the contending forces of permanence and change. Like other island cities built in service of trade and empire, such as Manhattan or Hong Kong, Singapore bares traces of the contend-

<sup>7</sup>According to the 2013 HDB Annual report available at [www.hdb.gov.sg](http://www.hdb.gov.sg). Accessed Dec 10, 2013.



ing forces of continuous change and assimilation at war with the physical limitations of its island footprint. Since the city's founding, this "little red dot" on the map has seen migrations and occupations and near ceaseless change. New faces come to do business. New buildings rise above the skyline. Borrowed language inflects local slang. These are symptoms of city life organized around modern capitalism. Although Singapore occupies a fixed place on the map, its people have responded to shifts in global power, to the changing winds of trade, and to the ceaseless flow of goods and capitol of modern commerce. The city assimilates change. Thus, this perpetual change gains permanence: Singapore has always been this way. Singapore may always remain a place of the present with a shift in pace of change. These two constants attended our small study of Singaporean lived experience in a small neighborhood: transience and permanence.

Tiong Bahru embodies this tenuous binary as an old place in a new city. From the neighboring condominiums that tower above the district on three sides, Tiong Bahru looks like a small white tooth, a gap forever preserved in the changing skyline. The residents who, whether by accident or design, spend their time in history's gap, rather than in the towers that surround it, are active participants in a performance of taste, and their renewed attraction draws attention to the permanence of an historical place. Like the bounded-ness of the island nation itself, the floor-plan of a historic building offers a strict template within which to fit such a wide variety of identities and cultures and styles and tastes. Admiration of the neighborhood's historical character is performed in day-to-day acts of homage: retaining a tile wall or an original light fixture; purchasing antique knickknacks in the back room of Books Actually; stopping the Satay man as he pushes his hot cart through the front garden; keeping a rare song bird on the balcony. These actions perform a complex negotiation between past and present: by moving in, upgrading the kitchens and bathrooms, and joining in the daily lifestyle, new residents embody change. To older generations, new residents are the agents of the transience and change they sense around them; to new residents, the older generations offer the comforting sense of connectedness to the past. Though they work together to celebrate and preserve the historical character of Tiong Bahru, these everyday actions inexorably bring change.

Photography has a unique claim to these two modes of experience—transience and permanence. Every photographer shares a *modus operandi*: to make still and permanent a transient moment. To shoot a photograph is to encapsulate one moment, chosen and preserved from

a lifetime of change and flux. We started out to see if we could capture one moment in the life of a neighborhood undergoing a process of rapid gentrification and change; instead, by choosing photography, we interacted with that balance between permanence and transience. Our conversations brought these two poles of experience together. Even as we talked about the neighborhood changing, with each photograph our neighbors and we pushed pins in the map, marking forever our place and our moment, in Tiong Bahru's history. "We lived here, then" these photographs say. To respond to an advertisement to have photographers come to your home and photograph you: this is an act of self-making, of writing the self into the historical record. We all want to stand up and be counted as one of the insiders, at home in the flux, an "original" in a hip neighborhood, and an agent of change. As we look at these images again, from our studio in New York, on the other side of the world, I can hear myself joining this silent refrain: "We lived here, then. We lived there when it mattered. This is our record of that time, that place, those people. We were one of them, too." I too have a stake in this story.