

Contesting Space on Pulau Ujong and Beyond

Tanah & Air Reflections 19 07 2026

Another Black Flag

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It's always "write to the government!" or "sign this petition!" as defensive/reactive reflexes, never a questioning of the very seizing of spaces by the colonial state in its old and current forms.

There is an obvious critique here of the lack of strategic imagination, but I want to point to the need, first and foremost, to recognise that the state is not a neutral arbiter of space that sometimes makes poor, unideal decisions about it. It is an extractive entity whose legitimacy is predicated on the continuous violent control over seized territory. The modern nation-state (run by "local" elites) is the direct continuation of the colonial state (run by colonial elites), and is not to be negotiated with. The contestation of pockets of seized space, absent challenging the state as its rightful owner, operates on the logic that the state's enclosure and management of space is legitimate.

The relationship between the spaces of Pulau Ujong (and its surrounding islands) and the "post-colonial" singapore state is identical to the relationship between the territory and its former colonial powers. It is a top-down seizure of space based strictly on the extractive interests of capital and statecraft, binding land-waters (tanah air) once negotiated through complex, fluid relationships, by legalised, militarised borders. That authority is inherited directly from the british colonials.

The 1966 *Land Acquisition Act*, which the post-colonial state has used to seize land, was expanded from the 1920 colonial *Land Acquisition Ordinance*, which itself drew heavily from the 1894 *Indian Land Acquisition Act* enacted under the british raj. The state limits our imagination of space to the binary of "public" (state-owned) or "private," and decrees that any historic use of space not made legible to it is illegitimate and that it could therefore claim that space. Through the narrative of absolute land scarcity based on the idea of Pulau Ujong's smallness when isolated, by borders, from its surrounding archipelago and beyond, the state justifies its authority to seize land (and water bodies) and manage how it is used. Consequently, as Orang Laut/Pulau communities are split and displaced by borders, they are also severed from their connection to specific localities. People whose lives were defined largely by their relations to the sea, and their autonomy to travel through it, are forced into fixed, inland state housing. Kampung are cleared, and atop their ruins, the state raises military barracks and other state projects. Coastlines where the Orang Laut fished and lived are militarised or outright destroyed by land reclamation, for the "public good," which could mean anything from state housing to commercial development.

People are understandably upset by the idea of losing limited "green spaces" and some of the few (generally bourgeois) spaces we have, for the local art scene, to state projects. However, whilst the persistent cycles of mutilation of Pulau Ujong must end, asking the state, the source of that mutilation, to "save" a forest, or not to "zone" an art space out of existence, concedes that the state has the legitimate right to own and distribute that land in the first place, operating on the logical grounds set by the state and leading only to conclusions favourable to the state. It ignores the continuous violence and destruction enacted by the state, upon nature and peoples, in the name of its interests.

Many of the online petitions and appeals in reaction to the announced plans to clear large parts of gillman barracks/forest seem to suggest that nature is only permitted to exist if it is functionalised and integrated into the state's drawn grids, with human utilitarian or aesthetic purposes.

3. Increasingly warmer Singapore needs the passive cooling effect provided by forests.

[Singapore is heating up at twice the global rate](#) despite innovative climate solutions and the One Million Trees program.

Forests on elevated terrain like the Southern Ridges have amplified cooling effect well beyond the forest edges. Atmospheric systems do not differentiate between native and non-native species (which is what the EIA framework focuses on to evaluate forest value). Instead it is the forest canopy structure, total biomass volume, and tall trees density that are key. Fragmented greenery simply does not replicate the effects of a contiguous forest ecosystem.

4. Community spaces for sports and an active, healthier SG: Telok Blangah Archery Club TBAC is the Singapore's only open field archery practice venue -- members include national archery team athletes. The proposed development has unfortunately effected their club lease renewal to be suspended since 2024. The Academy of Singapore Teachers nearby also has a running track that could be preserved as part of a lifestyle enclave. Data-backed evidence shows that lush green spaces directly correlates with lower cortisol levels, reduced blood pressure, and a significant drop in anxiety and stress. This is not merely psychological; mature forests release antimicrobial compounds called *phytoncides* which boost and strengthen immune systems.

From an online petition to "save Gillman Barracks/Forest — build homes in GSW instead." Change.org.

Through demonstrating the “usefulness” and “importance” of specific spaces, they hope that the state, in its great compassion, may consider designating such spaces “protected” “nature parks” or “reserves.” But nature is an amoral spectrum of autonomous, diverse ecosystems. It does not exist for “our” sake. It does not exist to be conquered and contained à la the colonial fetish of the Garden (City). The very framing of “save our green spaces” says that nature ought to be managed and allocated limited space by a planning bureau, and integrated into the grid, that that relation of domination is not only legitimate but also necessary. Contesting space on the grounds set by the state therefore forecloses possible imaginations of how the use of space can be negotiated socially and inter/intracommunally beyond the spectre of a violent occupying power.

One must also recognise the state’s hand in manufacturing challenging conditions like the scarcity in spaces for local artists. With the state’s extensive control of space on these islands through its seizing and imposition of rules, independent art spaces, not unlike artists themselves, cannot easily emerge. The structural cost barriers force a choice, for precarious artists/cultural workers, between submission to the state’s control (through the national arts council patronage), and being captured by bourgeois forces. Legible “private ownership” of space happens through formal leasing and therefore happens at the mercy of the state, making accessing venues more of a challenging process for artists. The messy, accessible, experimental baseline required for a thriving independent art scene is figuratively and physically excluded from the landscape. Hence, state-owned properties like the gillman barracks are perceived to be important and the only option for affordable or accessible spaces for artistic creation and collaboration. The irony should not be lost that gillman barracks was originally constructed by and for british colonisers—the predecessors to the current police of spaces—on land they claimed was merely “jungle and swamp.”

Specific locality-based petitioning frames the state’s absolute control of land and extractive relation to it as isolated incidents of mismanagement. The response, however, should not just be a larger national petition that begs for better overall state management of space. Reformists argue that petitions for state concessions are a necessary pragmatic “harm reduction” to protect vulnerable ecosystems or niche communities in the immediate term. But the grounds of contesting space set by the state, of negotiation, operate within the legal framework as its limiting boundaries of reality and struggle. They only increase the elasticity of the state’s control of space, reinforcing its self-appointed role as owner of seized space and maintaining the subservient relationality between artists and the state, as well as the subjection of nature to colonial management. The extractive dynamic between tanah air and the state is unbroken.

We start with the refusal to accept nation-states as legitimate owners of spaces, with imagining beyond negotiating within the limits they set, beyond an episteme based on domination.

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Reflections originally written on July 19 2026, in response to initial popular attempts at negotiating land use with the state through petitions and chit-chat events.

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