

Orang Seletar's Perspectives of the Tambrau Strait

A Field Guide to designing for
the living Strait through their
Objects and Practices



Who are the Orang Seletar?

The Orang Seletar, a subgroup of the Orang Laut sea nomads indigenous to the Tamberau Strait (Original name for the Tebrau Strait given by the Orang Seletar), once freely traversed its waters in boathouses, inhabiting the estuarine and coastal environments of Singapore and Johor for generations. Following Singapore's independence in 1965, fears of arrest for being stateless and pressures from coastal urbanisation forced most to resettle permanently in Johor, including at the village of Kampung Sungai Temon.

Living in close within the natural environments of the Strait, where their livelihood is dependent on nature, the Orang Seletar naturally holds a very different perception and relationship with the Strait from state governments, private developers and urban dwellers.

This field guide will explain their perception and relationship with the Strait through their objects and associated lived cultural practices, and what can be learned from the values embodied as a designer for the Strait.

Why their perspectives matters?

Manifesto for a Living Tambrau Strait

The Strait is not empty blue.

The Strait is not a void to be filled by developers and planners with towers and industrial facilities. The Strait is not lifeless where rigid borders can be drawn and enforced.

The Strait is very much lived in,

by the indigenous Orang Seletar,
by the ecologies thriving for centuries before the borders of nation-states.
It is a sea of kin, connecting to places that hold stories and memories.
It is a living being who sustains life, to whom one must be grateful for.

For too long, the state and developers have **reproduced the fictional gaze of an empty sea**, as waters to be filled, profit to be extracted, surfaces to be governed.

They sought to impose order upon the unruly sea, to claim it as theirs.

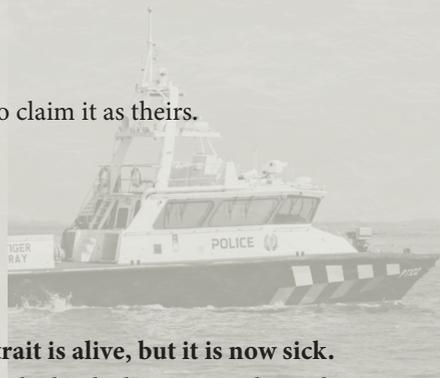
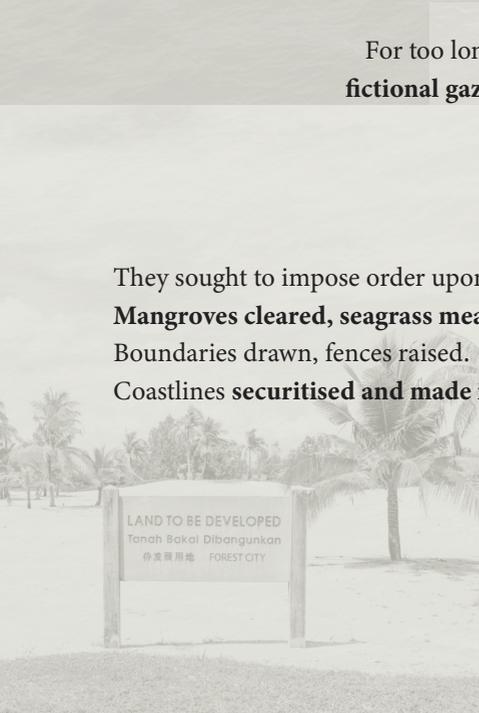
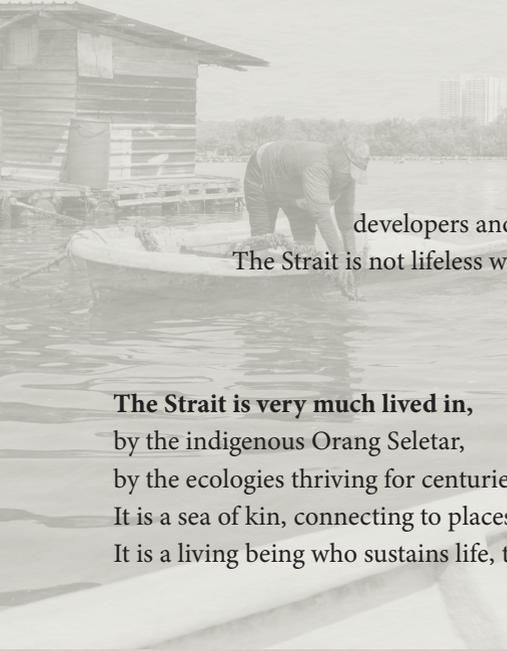
Mangroves cleared, seagrass meadows destroyed.

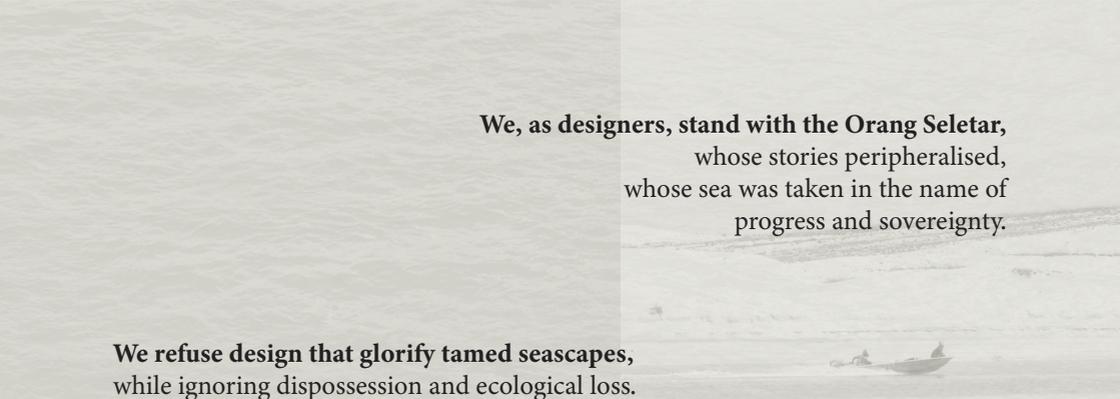
Boundaries drawn, fences raised.

Coastlines **securitised and made inaccessible.**

The Strait is alive, but it is now sick.

From the lands that were reclaimed,
and the trash that were dumped.



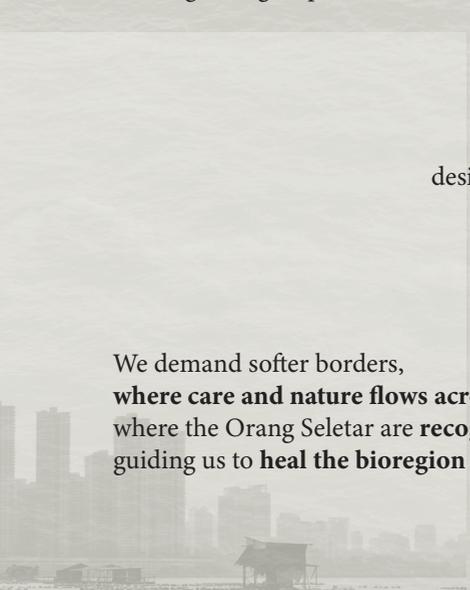


We, as designers, stand with the Orang Seletar,
whose stories peripheralised,
whose sea was taken in the name of
progress and sovereignty.

We refuse design that glorify tamed seascapes,
while ignoring dispossession and ecological loss.



We call for designs of relation,
design that acknowledge those who inhabit the Strait,
humans and more-than-humans alike.



We demand softer borders,
where care and nature flows across boundaries,
where the Orang Seletar are **recognised as ecological stewards,**
guiding us to **heal the bioregion that spans both shores.**

We want their perspective of the sea to be seen,
through design that **include and express indigenous wisdoms,**
mediating between different interests of the sea.

Let the Strait be reimagined,
as a **zone of care, of reciprocity,**
as a commons of coexistence,
to live *with* the sea, not *against* it.



Let the Strait flow again.

Relational Views of the Strait

Relationality



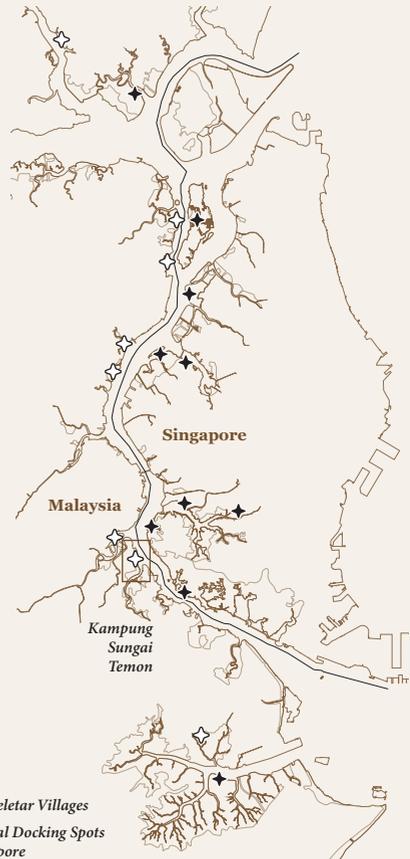
*The Tambrau Strait's Environment:
The Sea, the Mangrove*

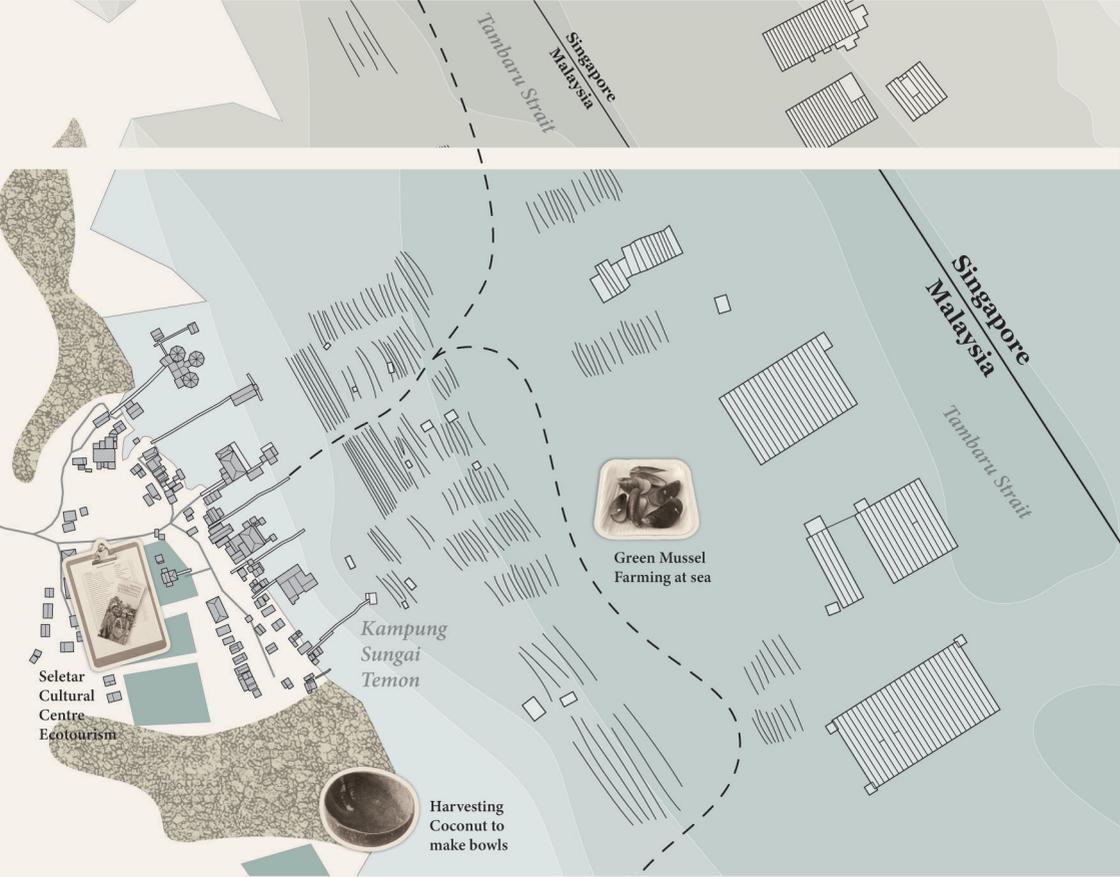
The Orang Seletar perceives the Tambrau Strait as their home, a place for living deeply embedded in nature. In their eyes, everything about the Strait is interconnected with the natural environment. From the flora and fauna inhabiting the sea and the mangroves on both sides of the Strait, to how their practices and livelihood depend on the environment.

The next few objects each represents a cultural practice of the Orang Seletar that embodies this deep interconnection with the Strait.

What does this mean for design?

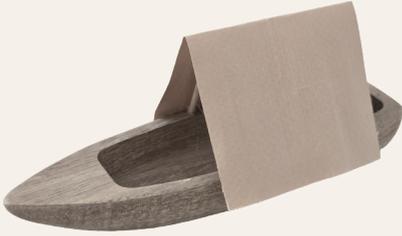
- We are a part of nature, regardless of how far detached our lifestyles are from the “natural” environment may seem
- We take from nature, and we give things back to nature
- The same applies to design, with its dependency and impact on nature; Our designs are connected to the environment





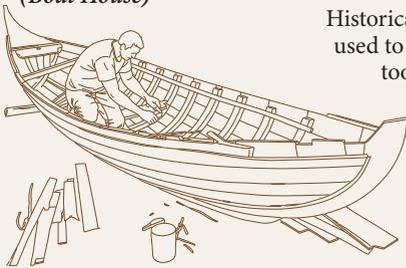
The Strait is a Provider

Resourcefulness



Pau Kajang
(Boat House)

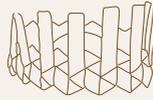
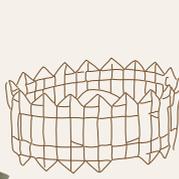
Historically, timber from the mangroves were harvested and used to construct their nomadic boat houses, a house and a tool to traverse the Strait, to reach the fishes in the sea.



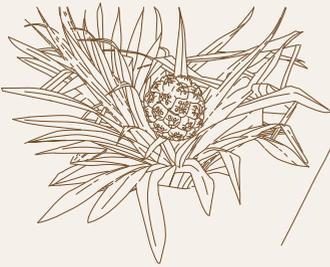
Besides consuming coconuts as food, the often disposed shell is repurposed into reusable bowls for serving food.



Mangkuk Kelapa
(Coconut Bowl)



Tajak and Selepang
(Weaved Crowns and Clothing)



Seashore Pandan and Nipah leaves are harvested from the mangroves and woven into crowns and traditional clothing to be adorned during festivals

Bakau wood from the mangroves are harvested and smoked in kilns to be converted into charcoal, which can be used as fuel for cooking.



Arang Bakau
(Mangrove Charcoal)

What does this mean for design?

- Be resourceful with the resources and materials that the local natural environment provides, turning them into useful tools or designs that can serve a greater purpose
- Indigenous practices of weaving and construction could be applied in design
- Minimise wastage by repurposing even the unwanted parts for other uses

The Strait needs care when using Sustainability

Seletar fishermen have the practice of releasing juvenile and unwanted fishes trapped in fishing nets to ensure the recovery of fish populations



*Jaring Ikan
(Fishing Net)*

What does this mean for design?

- Understand that the nature's resources, while renewable, takes time to replenish itself; Care needs to put in to facilitate this recovery
- Take only what is needed from the environment, don't extract unsustainably
- Design should reflect this principle of care for ecological balance

The Strait should be reciprocated Reciprocity



*Kupang
(Mussels)*



Mussel farming, a key economic activity of Orang Seletar today, is low-impact on the environment. Mussels filter seawater, feeding on phytoplankton, reducing eutrophication. Farm structures also act as artificial reef habitats for other marine life.

What does this mean for design?

- Besides merely taking from the nature, some of our designs can also be simultaneously beneficial for the environment; Find co-beneficial ways in design that can contribute back to the environment

The Strait has rhythms to adapt to

Adaptability



Lokan, Berongan
(Bivalves and Snails)



During Spring tide, the community heads to the mudflats to forage as it is the season when most of the coast is revealed. Much of their fishing and foraging practices are attuned to the tidal and monsoon rhythms of the Strait.

What does this mean for design?

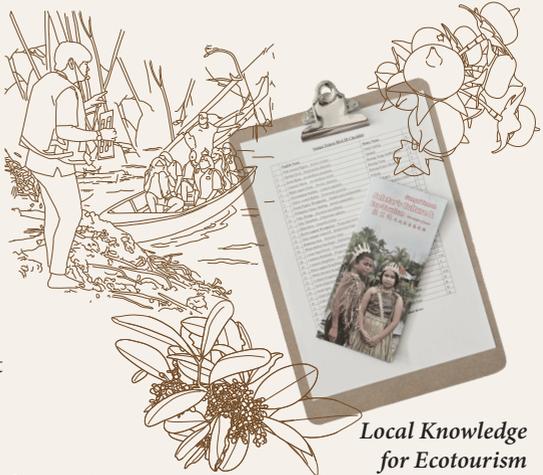
- Acknowledge that the natural environment has its natural rhythms
- Adapt and attune to these rhythms instead of trying to dominate or control it; Design that respond *with* tides and seasons, instead of *against* it

The Strait needs a voice today

Advocacy

The Orang Seletar village of Kampung Sungai Temon have brought visitors around their village and the mangroves, educating them about the local biodiversity and the significance of these habitats to the Orang Seletar community.

Documentation of their practices as part of the gallery for the tour has also served as legal evidence for a continued place-based practice of indigenous heritage during the court case against encroaching developments nearby.



Local Knowledge
for Ecotourism

What does this mean for design?

- Design should provide a platform to amplify this local knowledge about the environment, giving communities of the sea a voice to share their perspectives to others and form a bridge between the different worldviews

Conclusion

All of these objects and their associated practices reveal the Orang Seletar's profound connection to the Tebrau Strait. The Strait is not merely a body of water but a living space intertwined with their livelihood, cultural identity, and ecological knowledge. These relationships embody values that offer important lessons for design.

Social and architectural design should draw from these principles to create interventions that are sensitive to the Orang Seletar's deep relational understanding of the Strait.

