



## 4A Talks //

John Choi x Kien Situ in conversation  
as part of *Holding Patterns: Kien Situ*

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## TRANSCRIPT



**KIEN SITU** Hi, I'm Kien Situ, and I'm here with John Choi from CHROFI Architects.

**JOHN CHOI** Hi, I'm John Choi, acting chair for 4A and director of CHROFI Architects.

**KIEN SITU** To begin, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as traditional custodians of this land and recognise their ongoing connection to land, borders and community. I pay my respects to the First Australians and the Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that this land was never ceded, and we occupy it as uninvited guests. Hey, John. How are you?

**JOHN CHOI** Good.

**KIEN SITU** It's nice to be here with you. I'm excited to talk about my recent exhibition here, *Holding Patterns*, curated by Con Gerakaris and Reina Takeuchi. So what did you think of the work? Did you have any initial questions? I suppose, like from a background of architecture? I'm also— well, I'm sharing a background of architecture, talking to an established architect, I would wonder what would be the initial questions that might come to your mind when viewing my work? And perhaps we can start off the conversation that way?

**JOHN CHOI** Sure. Look, there were two things I was really pondering, looking downstairs. That tension between very strong, defined forms and the contrast with the fluidity of the casting and other techniques that you've got there and how those two things hold different kinds of readings as they play off each other. Some of the column space is quite architectural, so I can almost imagine that at a much larger scale as well. You can almost imagine it being a cast of a concept model for a tower project or something. I guess coming from an architectural background, I can see through that larger scale lens as well. The other thing was on that big piece, really trying to work out how you actually did it, the casting of the very strongly defined form that has so much hollowed out. Yeah. I'd love to hear how you actually made that piece.

**KIEN SITU** Well we can start with the piece in the window. Yeah. I was also pretty surprised when I took it out of the boxing or the mould that I made for it. It was kind of like... kind of imagine if you were doing a drawing and you kind of rotate the drawing at different points to I think realise certain details of it better, that's how I approached that sculpture. I was turning it at certain points and the number of turns I was allowed was limited, limited by weight and gravity because it got pretty heavy. And as it is now, as it stands, it is pretty heavy as well. For that piece it's interesting because these works, they bear the appearance of a ruin or something that's been eroded away. And I think that the initial response to look at it, is to imagine it as a carved out thing. But actually there's been no subtraction for any of these works, they haven't been taken away from a whole mass. And they're being created additively. So it's this additive process working within the limit, the time limits particularly of this material and it's the stages that it takes on as it sets. It was a process of building up certain areas where I knew I would be able to stand, say in particular the base of the sculpture. But then as I rotated it, I was just working within the time limits, the gravity of each orientation, and it was kind of to try and create this kind of kaleidoscope of different perspectives meeting in the sculpture. I mean, like with special parameters of the sculptures are set by the edges of the mould and that's where you get this contrast of something that I'd measured and kind of calculated and something that was completely unexpected, something which kind of follows the will of the material.

**JOHN CHOI** Because all eight edges are cast, you know, all eight corners of that. So when you rotate it, you must be rotating in two axes to get the plaster to go into all the corners. Yeah, I'm still baffled that you might have created a work, particularly when you say there's no subtraction at all, which means that you have to time the curing in a way that allows sufficient fluidity to get into the four corners, but to wait until certain things set before you might have to rotate. I don't know. I'm just trying to

work out how you did it!

**KIEN SITU** There were definitely some moments where I was quite forceful with the material trying to get into the corners. But it can be quite a laborious process, physically. I know we've touched briefly on architecture as we both share that common ground, but before architecture, I worked on construction sites for a few years. In a strange way, I feel like the process of making this work, which kind of really blossomed while I was studying architecture, has a lot of similarities with my physical day-to-day pre-studying architecture. Yes, it's kind of repetitive, laborious, like these pinpoint moments of heavy lifting. Frankly, I'm also a little bit baffled with how it turned out and I'm pretty interested in it too. I guess that's the surprising thing about these multiples and these dimensions that I'm working with. It gives you and myself as well an overall idea of the kind of volume that these sculptures may take up. In my mind that's kind of set, but then how that is articulated because well, whatever happens within the ten minutes that this material can be put in, is always.. It's usually a surprise.



**JOHN CHOI** Yeah. I love it. I mean you can see that, you can sense that in the work. You know there's the casting and the preparation, of course there's a control and there's a precision in setting all the casting etc. But there's a lot of intuition that will come just from the moment, judgements as it is formed. The work itself carries those dualities as well and everything in between. Even inherently in the making of it, you can't control the way that form might - you have less degree of control as you move away from the casted edges. In the landscape ones, where you can actually see the surface texture of that uncasted section, it looks almost like a natural material because you get these layers of textures where some of it has this sense of fluidity and then you get little sparks of almost growth, like mould like growth that's in there. So the material you use must provide different set points and certain phenomenas, almost that chemical and naturalistic kind of phenomenons that come up that you can also interact with as you create it I guess.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah, absolutely. I remember the first time I used the material and all the stages that I'm probably more familiar with now, they were surprising. They took me by surprise, and the natural progression of that material going from a fluid state to a hard state, a solid state, I suppose. There are different forms allowed because of that and it's interesting that you pointed that out because they share that same material and they can go from looking very fluid to almost like mould or construction debris sometimes I find. I suppose this takes me back to, you know, I did a few courses on the structures of materials and unión. I remember one of my students saying something like, you know, concrete. I suppose this can be said of many materials as well. But they showed us the Swiss or the German beautiful concrete, which was almost like, yeah, it's like a wall can be an artwork in of itself.

**JOHN CHOI** Oh it is! The good concreters, they are incredible craftsmen because you have to get the chemical composition right and the vibration right to a particular effect. You never know what you get until you take the formwork off, and it is a real art to get that right. But it's always done. I love looking at that, because it sort of made me think how in architecture we only really think of the cast edge, the cast finish, whereas there's so much intrigue in the uncast part of the concrete. It's like a whole area that hasn't actually been explored. There may be, I think there are a few architects in the past that have looked at that. Actually, I don't know whether they have, because there's been casting on sand or in soil and lifting it up so it's using the textural quality of a more naturalistic kind of edge to casting. But ultimately, it's a cast edge, whereas I think what you're telling me is that all those other edges are just uncast, raw solidification of the materials.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah. I suppose there are a variety of verbs or actions in getting that material to be where you could or should be, I suppose. Yeah, it's interesting what you said about the surface edge and often that's the concern. I remember as we were talking earlier in this week, we touched on the topic of heritage. We were talking about this book by the South Korean German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, where he mentions Ise shrine in Japan, the shrine that they rebuild every 20 years, the inner and outer shrine and one hundred and twenty three shrines in between. I'm quite sure it's every twenty years that they rebuild it? And, you know, UNESCO is having some real trouble with classing it as a World Heritage item because it was really twenty years old but they had been doing it for I don't know how many hundreds of years. So it's possibly their oldest new shrine or their newest old shrine.

It's interesting that there's that idea of heritage, but that idea of heritage is a very surface thing.

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah. I think heritage, it's fantastic, the idea of heritage that our built environment and our cultural construct, has value related to how we identify with ourselves and how we understand history and our place in the world. And as you say, I think it is really, really thin. You know, it's fantastic to have the word heritage, it's coded in our planning controls. It is in our language and our discourse. But often it's really focussed on the last visible layer of history, and particularly in a country like Australia where European settled history is so thin and we're in a country that's got the longest surviving culture in the world. There is so much to explore there. And when you look at the history of any particular area, there are layers of natural history to kind of early life forms, each stage of history has set the scene for the next. There are links that cut across that depth and I think when you look at heritage in a deeper way and as you say, in an ongoing transformational way, it creates room for a future, because you're able to see that you're really in a very thin spectrum of time with a very deep history behind you and your actions may set the scene for what happens in front of you. Perhaps Asian cultures have understood the continuities and the kind of, that you are really only a thin point in time. You know, even ourselves, we see ourselves as people, as being permanent. But, you know, in a physical sense, we remake ourselves every seven years, ourselves and all those things. Everything happening around us is in a constant dynamic form, really - maybe form is the wrong word, but you know it's a kind ghost really. Because the reality is that it's things in flow, shapes in flow. Depending on the time spectrum that you look at, it appears more or less permanent. But if you look at it long enough everything flows.

**KIEN SITU** Different rhythms.

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, I forgot to say, when I first walked in, the thing that actually first engaged me was the smell of the ink. It just immediately brought back, because I came to Australia when I was nine and one of the few sort of strong memories remaining from Korea is learning how to do calligraphy and the smell of that ink. It's surprising that smell is still part of it - you must have used a lot of ink in that work because it's really still pungent.

**KIEN SITU** It's interesting that you bring that up, because when I first decided that I should explore some material narratives which were formative, familiar, but also somewhat forgotten, it was the smell as well, which really I think triggered something. And there's this idea that scent and memory... I think it was Herzog and de Meuron who have mentioned this in their practice

as well? They were talking about designing a scent or perfume or a space, which was, I don't know, imbued with scent or something like that.

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, yeah.

**KIEN SITU** That was the thing which was a really strong trigger for me. You know that feeling when you'd forgotten that you forgot about something?

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah. well that was the feeling I had was a reminiscing that just came

back really quickly.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah. So I absolutely love that smell as well.

**JOHN CHOI** Tell me about how you sort of got to do what you're doing and explore the work through that cast medium.

**KIEN SITU** It was in uni that I first started to make physical things. I think that a lot of this has been in my subconscious for a while. But I think when it came to making physical things and proposing things which were physical, which was supposed to be linked to this more abstract, invisible notion of culture, a lot of these questions came up. It was in my first year that I first experimented with casting. I think we touched on this briefly. It was that I had these plans, these grand plans to cast this than that for a project. And I remember the preparations were quite annoying, there were lots of little things to think about. And once I thought that all this stuff was ready and looked things up and checked things again and realised, oh, no, we've actually also got to resolve this and resolve that. I suppose that's good training for the architectural process, this habit of checking. So I had this grand plan, when it came to the moment where all of this was to be cast, all my preparations and everything, just went out the window. It was like this strange change in rhythms, the rhythm of slow preparation. And then all of a sudden, this go, go, go. You've got no time to think!

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah you've got a window too.

**KIEN SITU** Yes. And it was a disaster. Nothing that I'd actually planned really came out and that was frustrating, especially when you've got something due very soon. But I think in the wake of that, looking back on that work, I was about to throw them out, some of these sculptures were next to the garbage. And my dad said to me, this is when I was living at home, what is that? I was like, oh, don't even look at it, I'm throwing it out. And he took it out of the rubbish pile and he placed it on the table, and he's like, I'm keeping that.

I started to look at it more and I started to become interested in the idea of instigating a creative process. Those potential opportunities that emerge which are outside of your plan, they began to interest me. Just this idea of a kind of conceptual framework decaying and kind of, becoming something else. This was an idea which kind of really stuck to me because, I guess I started to think of heritage in that way. This idea of dualities and background and identity and like the position of growing up away from your mother or fatherland, to be put in a new context and to become something new, to adapt and to change came a strong instigator for more of that kind of thought, which I think is what I'm exploring in the work in a material sense and a process sense.

**JOHN CHOI** It's also the way you explain it. You can also read it as everyone has their own biases and perspectives, of course, we all need them to act and know how to be in the world. But, it's the degree of how open you can keep yourself to things that may not quite fit into your expectations, or to things where there's an opportunity that opens up. I can kind of read the process also as a process of well you have certain plans and structures and the cast that you made. But the process allows for discovery along the way and changing perspectives. So, yeah, it's nice.



**KIEN SITU** On that, I was chatting to Michael Tawa at USYD about forming a thesis. I was just showing him my work and we were having to talk about these kinds of topics and he told me to look into this concept called emergence. He said that it's something that technology philosophers and systems philosophers look at a lot. This idea of something becoming other than itself. An example, he told me was, take the internet, for instance, like the plans of what it was going to be were quite scripted, you know, planned. But then, in being applied in the context of the world, I suppose, like evolving into this global communication channel. It became something other than what it was planned to be. I suppose that's always been really interesting to me, too.

I know that you also touch on the idea of dualities. But it's almost like the dualities to me, it's interesting to be like, yes, some of the objects are quite massive and yet fragile or measured, but also chaotic. But I also think that in establishing the dualities, it's kind of a challenge to look, I don't know, at that between, which is a sort of channel to transduality, like beyond those two things. What is the synthesis of those two things? Yeah, because, in a lot of stuff that I've been reading often, there can be quite a sharp distinction between, in the Far East philosophy and all that was

like this and, you know, Western logic and the Enlightenment was like this. This is how that has manifested in their built cultures. But I'm interested in what that bridge is between those two. Like as we were talking about Ise shrine earlier, where it was almost like the idea and its continuous evolution, or say scroll paintings in the continuous mark of collectors or critics or other artists, you know, the red seals that go into scrolls are always changing the work and changing who owns it and what it means because of that. Who it's passed through. Whereas, we were talking about, in that book as well Byung-Chi Han writes about a German cathedral where they replace a brick every time it's time to replace the brick. And although they're not replacing the whole structure in one go, in the passage of I don't know how many years or even decades in terms of material, the whole thing is a new thing.

**JOHN CHOI** Whether it's a building and we value it's physical construct to represent something about our past and our identity through that and there's a desire for that work to be authentic. But really, a building is created at a particular point in time because of the needs and desires of people of the day and that affects the way they make things and all the things that brought it to its fruition. In its use, it also embodies memories of how people used it in the culture that was there. And then in an ongoing sense, because society changes and it's physical remaking and maintenance needs to be part of it. There's multiple ways that a work can manifest those memories. And the Japanese temple you talked about isn't so much about the memory being held in one point in time's structure because it's remade all the time. It's the process of remaking that's probably more representative of it's cultural history and its meaning. It's useful to always see it in a bigger context, both I think in time and layers of history, because I think it allows us to understand the work in a fuller way and also place it in an ongoing sense, in a way that can relate to us.

Well I think it's narrow to focus on a point in time kind of representation as an authentic thing, because I think it just thins out the power it could have. It's fair enough for certain cultural artefacts that were created at a particular point in time, we almost want to preserve it and hold onto that as the marker of that meaning. Particularly built environments and things that are less object-like, I find that it can be quite thin to try to hold onto it like a painting or a cultural artefact.

It seems like the physical making of the work you got into through university, through studying architecture and that got you into the power of the physicality of some of the work that you're doing. How those things can mean certain things to you and what would you like those things to try to express? I'd like to go back and better understand where those thoughts started to come into play - was that at uni as well? Or was it through your high school or later years that you started to see a potential to express certain kinds of thoughts?

**KIEN SITU** Yeah, I think uni gave impetus to everything. But as you've mentioned, I think it is all of that before as well, which then comes into play or finds an opportunity to come into play.

**JOHN CHOI** When did you start becoming conscious of it? Because all of anyone's background forms what you do you, but when did it become more self conscious?

**KIEN SITU** That's a really good question. I think when given the opportunity to propose a project or an idea on land or on a site in Australia or Sydney at uni, these questions of identity and place come up as often do when you're studying this kind of thing. There's always this kind of tension between internationalism, modernity, science and technology and then there's regionalism, economies of craft. Often felt properties of building hospitals are coming to that too. I think it was when presented with those situations, it made me question, what the identity of a building could be and what they would or should be in Australia. I guess the training that I got as well was really Eurocentric, you know, in the canon and the history of Western architecture and all that kind of thing. But I suppose that study of history and theory, as well as being presented with that situation, kind of instigated a sort of investigation into, I don't know, personal history? And the things that I would value and the things that I would kind of prioritise or think to be important. I suppose looking at a lot of old buildings around the world, and I love to travel to and visit the stuff, get a sense of the space, there's this idea of singular and archetypical, you know, archetypical arrangements of space. And I can't remember who said it, but it was something like the politics is in the plan. The special arrangements and the aesthetic is the elevation.

It makes me think of Walter Benjamin, which is that politicising aesthetics can only lead to one thing - war, which then he follows up with, and histories are written by the victors. It made me sort of think of what all these interests that go into creating an identity of the built environment at a macro scale, then on the micro scale, the identity of the people using or inhabiting these buildings. Those are questions that I was asked. I was raised by my Mum's mum, Chinese grandmother. And a lot of particularities there growing up in my household, a lot of art books that my mum and dad collected, some of which I still have today and which I like theoretical references for me. There was always a sense of the other. There's always a sense of going to school and there's all this and then you come home and it's way different. It was pervasive in my household. I mean my grandmother, she used to borrow these videotapes which were, I suppose bootleg Chinese movies which she then upgraded to this Chinese cable. Yeah. It's got all the channels -

**JOHN CHOI** I've got the Korean version!

**KIEN SITU** Yeah. Just period dramas all the time. All the time. There was a Cartoon Network as well which was good. Yeah it's good really. All the stuff I couldn't really understand, but which is also very fascinating. She used to sleep in our room growing up. She was taking care of us and she used to sleep to this Chinese radio. I think we have it somewhere still, I'd love to find it. I just don't know if stations would still be going. All these songs and all this conversation used to put me to sleep.

**JOHN CHOI** So are you second generation Chinese Australian, or third?



**KIEN SITU** Yeah I'm second. My mum, she would also be I think second or third generation Chinese and Malaysian because her grandma left China at the time it was quite tumultuous. I mean she also shares the history of being in a new place. I've been reading a lot of this French Martinique poet's writing lately. His name is Édouard Glissant. He was a key figure in writing about the African diaspora, particularly around the Caribbean. I looked at the progression of his career as really inspiring, the way he writes about how new identity is formed, how certain people look more towards this kind of ethnic homeland. Whereas, later on in his writings, he emphasised the importance of this new land and creating this new hybrid identity. This non-hierarchical, new hybrid identity and what he called the right to opacity, the right to the other not having to be understood, to it to be able to carry on in pavements. All these metaphors, I suppose, linked to all these writings, like many architects end up reading 'In Praise of Shadows' by Tanizaki. I always loved how Tanizaki wrote about precious stones in the East and West, how the Chinese or in the Eastern world the stone that they revere most isn't something clear, like a diamond it was something murky and ambiguous, the jade. Yeah. So actually we've gone on all these tangents.

**JOHN CHOI** No, no, no, no, it's fantastic. You also mentioned in our previous conversation the vernacular architecture book in a class by Glenn Murcutt that connected with you. You know, the whole idea of architecture without architects, something that evolves over a long time. Again, another thread that talks to an interest about, I guess, how things start to represent or have links to our identity, meaning all that stuff.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah. When we touched on that before, what I found really interesting

was that you spoke of, you know, there's this economy across craft particularity of a certain place, like what they built, is also just what was readily available.

**JOHN CHOI** Exactly. The stone. The materials.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah. A place which has received a lot of attention probably in a good way lately in Yemen. But I remember when I was looking at lots of different vernacular architectures in my studies, and I still am, Yemen is really interesting. It's so old. They had this one city, it's like the Manhattan of Yemen because they've got these mud skyscrapers. Maybe I shouldn't call it 'the Manhattan', it was its own thing before that, but mud skyscrapers. Also I think they are often rebuilt and worked on because of the nature of the material. But you talked about, you know, these craftsmen would have the knowledge of how to make a brick, whereas, for most of us, the technology and origins of a brick is probably not immediate knowledge, it's something that we would specify. And say yep, so we're using Brick in the works in this way with that. But, it's not like they're importing technologies, structural technologies in from here and there.

From talking about that, it made me think of Sloterdijk's metaphors for preglobalisation and globalisation. There's another German philosopher sort of related Byung-Chul Han we're talking about called Peter Sloterdijk, and he's got a beautiful metaphor for that, where he talks about first bubbles, you know, these pockets of civilisation which don't have the particular access or knowledge which could be a kind of similar thing, isn't it? Access and knowledge in that situation to one another, so they exist as bubbles. But we live in a time now where we are many, many, many interconnected bubbles through like a large phone creating a kind of global system. I suppose this idea of hybridisation and its importance or decontextualised and certain technologies and materials is interesting to me. Decontextualising, if we're looking at history in like a linear sense, but also decontextualized geographically, physically and how that works. Because, you know, sometimes I think of the technologies that were brought into say a place like Dubai or something and when I think of steel and glass skyscrapers there, I just think of a magnifying glass. It's going to be like a crematorium or something, you know?

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, well, look, even when you talk about vernacular architecture and things, I guess for a long time in history, if you look at human civilisation, we didn't have print media, the material we got was pretty much limited to things nearby, because you don't have vehicles and cranes and power tools or any of this. Relatively in the full scale of history, it's a very modern phenomena. So invariably, the combination of the two means - the way that you could make and what you could make out of was reasonably limited. It's much easier to understand a cultural phenomena when it's the means of how you make something and how the influences in that cultural context are much, much more limited.

Yeah, so I think two thousand years ago, five thousand years ago, if you only lived twenty, thirty years of life, the first ten of that you're pretty young and not much able. So you've got twenty years in you and the majority of your time is spent trying to work out how to get food and keep yourself alive. You're very economical about what you create and how you create something to help you to do what you need to do. What the next generation does to build upon the knowledge that you've created to

adapt your built environment or your purpose people take on. There are some non-functional cultural layers that accrue over time, because of status and sort of other kinds of things, and there seems to be evidence that's there from early days as well. But that the effect they played and the time able to be spent on those things are more limited just because of the time available.

**KIEN SITU** One thing I always felt when studying architecture is, there's this kind of idea that we delve into a lot of extra architectural things; sociology, economics, politics, science, technology, all of that. As an architect, have I put you through all this extra architectural stuff and do you feel like at a point, the Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati talks about this, that we're doing architecture about architecture as opposed to delving into all these other things to validate what it is that we're doing. How do you feel about that? And if you don't feel good about that, then I'm sorry for putting you through this!

**JOHN CHOI** No, no, no, no. I love this question. I've been thinking about this a lot as well as through time. Even during the time that I went through architecture at Sydney University, the first degree had a very broad education, as you say, it had psychology, sociology, cultural mapping, all sorts of things that are peripheral to what traditionally would have been architecture. And then we started the second degree and the culture was completely different. It's like, well, you've done the first degree, now you're looking at architecture. Just, you know, stop that waffle. You control what you physically make and you physically draw and there are limits of what you can do. There are things that are within direct remit of the discipline of architecture and you should focus on that. Every other layer is really something that's outside of architecture. So, I had a very split education through Sydney University. Personally, I think they're both right, both perspectives are correct. Forever I'm torn to think about what we do through both lens, and there is a tension between the two because there is a beautiful way to practice architecture through the physical craft and what you shape and that could express. Like a piece of art in the sense through that lens. But equally and perhaps maybe more strongly, through the trajectory of our practice, we know what we do can have impact in much, much more broader ways.

I often think architects can be a little bit like set designers obsessed about the set, without realising the set is there for the play and because the way the set relates to the play, it can be really varied. Sometimes you need a strong set, sometimes you don't need a set at all. Sometimes it's very subtle to set the scene for the play or for the interactions that happen there. But to design a set without having some perspective on the play is a little odd. If you look at it from that perspective, then you can apply the same design thinking to help shape the nature of that play as much as the set itself and hold the tension between the two. We find that way of thinking about what we do more productive and particularly in today's condition, where the large challenges in the built environment go well beyond representing ideas and expressing ideas. It can have real effect beyond the symbolic, more performative in the way that it shapes how people interact. Now, material flows through our built environment. But soon as you do that, it muddies the clarity of work in isolation. And so there is a love to look at work in that way as well. But we feel strongly that we can have more effect if we can think about the work in a more kind of embedded, holistic way.



**KIEN SITU** I've often thought of, you know, the old symbol of the snake eating its tail and imagining the idea of the environment kind of giving birth to the conception of this thing, which will then affect the environment for future projects. It's interesting how you said that once you consider too much of this stuff it often muddies the conceptual purity of the architecture. Just off the top of your head, what do you reckon is a great example of one of those really pure projects that doesn't fit into its context, and what's an example of a more impure project that does very, very well for its context?

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, well, Olgiati's work because it's so irreverent to its function, to its context, there's a certain aesthetic, he probably didn't even like the idea of talking about an aesthetic. But there's a power to the work in its visual and spatial effect that appears to have its own logic. So for me that represents very much practicing architecture in a very autonomous manner. Other works, there's almost no physical form to it. There may be a practice where you'll imagine just some work like Assemble in the UK. Where their work, particularly their early work, is quite light in its physical presence. But a lot is working with the community in that area in how they use the design thinking to help create new cultural and economic phenomena, to

help a community that may be going through a decline to find new avenues, to find new life into the area. And the work, because of that interaction, often isn't fixed, it will change over time. It's hard to even have a singular image of that project, because the real interest in the project isn't the visual image of it, it's really about how it's transforming and helping over time.

It's quite a different way to practice architecture. Architects, we learn through our studies that there's core skills we have, core design thinking skills we have - to be able to imagine new possibilities in the world, to be able to make them more tangible, to help people kind of make choices and set a direction for the future. We're not particularly skilled in any technical dimensions or the economic or the social, etc. There are individual disciplines that we will understand and research with more thoroughness. And they but they're limited. They're not as practising. Well, how do you combine all these disparate things and put them together and imagine a new possibility? So that the projected quality, the projected skill set is quite strong in design, but traditionally design thinking has been about sort of putting physical things together for particular spatial and symbolic effect. But you can use the same design thinking skills - if you say it's not just about structuring physical relationships, but it's about structuring any kind of relationships that could create new phenomena in the world, then you can expand design beyond the physical dimension. And you are still creating structures, but they aren't just physical structures.

**KIEN SITU** It almost sounds like a practice of hybridisation, like creating hybrids or creating these aggregates of, I don't know, different fields. Yeah wow.

**JOHN CHOI** There are so many forces well beyond your control. It's like you're in a field of dynamic forces that are happening around you; economic, social, and you have limited room to have effect. But by how you imagine those things, you can help shape the flow of those different interactions in a new way that may have not existed.

I don't think it's even structural because you're always embedded amongst all these economic, social - a whole lot of forces - practical forces, different stakeholders, people wanting different things in a project. The range of stakeholders you have is quite broad and their demands. So in some sense, your window to have an effect is quite narrow. Understanding all those forces at play, how do you reshape how that can come together? In a way that may have not been done before or evolve in a way that you think would be constructive.

**KIEN SITU** That makes me think of I think it's a Léon Krier text, I don't know. I was more caught by this first sentence that he writes which I think deals with the etymology of the word architecture. He goes on to say, like archi, the prefix archi is a Greek word, meaning new or the first, the origin. But also the other prefix is in the word architecture, I think the tecton is to mean builder. And then made me think of the word archetype and also the word archive. And that word also has a meaning which is control, government domination, possession. It's interesting because I suppose the more I learn about architecture, interestingly, as it should become more physical, it becomes more abstract and political itself.

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, yeah, yeah. It is different when we talked about heritage before, talking about, you know, cultural artefacts or paintings, sculpture or tools or things

that are more contained - they are more contained in the way they exist in the world. The thing about architecture is that you're so embedded, an architect doesn't make architecture. You have clients and builders, you have the authorities, there's regulatory forces. It's a phenomenon that exists and that emerges. The architect does play a strong role in that, but really, it is so embedded as part of our society and the way that it emerges and hence the way that it has longevity and it has constant us. You can have the same building, but when you change the use of it, the meaning that project can have and the associations people have with it, will change. So of course, it's not just the physical work, it's in how it's used, how people get to understand and experience. It can be quite different if the use changes. Yeah, it's much, much more embedded in society. In some way, coming from an architecture background yourself and practicing in the art discipline creates a different freedom, because the work can be much more focussed on expression, and trying to express that from your perspective. Whereas the work of architecture is constantly shifting, because it's not something you can do on your own.

**KIEN SITU** Yeah absolutely, I think this is a good segue into how I started creating works. It was just sort of architecture apart from all these complex things that we just talked about - it's like a time, capital, land, clients with those things. If a painter wanted to do a painting just do a painting, I'm going to write some music, you can do that quite immediately if you have the tools. But it came to a point, it's like with all these ideas to have an exploratory practice, where does one begin? And I think it's this kind of exploratory way of making things which I'm hoping to eventually build into an ability to realise space or architecture. Hence where there's components of dismantled pieces for the time being. Someone who was writing about Rem Koolhaas saying that the more limits you give him, the further back him into a corner, the better he gets. I think to follow on from what you were saying about this idea of architecture kind of existing within limits and art not having those limits, there are those different rhythms, as we were talking about earlier. There's an immediacy in being able to make something straight away, as opposed to traversing all of these dynamic, invisible political forces to create something.

**JOHN CHOI** Well, I think all of those constraints and influences, they're an expression of all of that, and practising art. They're equally about expression of all of those things. So Rem's quote, 'when you have a lot of constraints, it makes design easier' because, you know, there are only certain things that can solve all those interactions inside your limits. It enables you to be more confident in the decisions and designs you come up with. And I think the power can be driven from that, you feel this is a really pure resolution of all of these forces at play. Even within a very constrained context, if you give a problem to five, ten different architects, they will resolve it in ten different ways. Quite different ways. Invariably, there is a hand of the architect who imagines how those things can come together. And again, because you've got particular skills in projecting the possibilities that others don't, others, even as a client, won't know there might be an alternate way to imagine how it comes together, because that skill set doesn't exist. In any given circumstances that may be one hundred, two hundred, a thousand different sorts of ways that it could come together. But if you put three varying scenarios, typically people feel they've seen enough options to make a selection, make a decision and move forward.



So just back on the topic of if you didn't have those constraints, it allows you to draw upon your own internal values and ideas for the project. But personally, I get much, much more satisfaction when you can see the forces at play and are quite strong, because it gives you something to interact with and to pull into the project. I guess it's a different way to practice. I'll get more satisfaction out of drawing on those forces. There's still plenty of room to have your own values and thoughts in the process that without a strong driver, whether it's a client or a brief or a site, it feels too thin in the way that I guess the way that I see architecture.

**KIEN SITU** That makes me think of this idea of the hand of the architect and signatures. For some practices or some artists/architects, it seems to be more of a signature in the process. They invent a process rather than invent a physical signature. I'd say that whilst Olgiati, who does seem to have a very strong physical signature, I'd say a practice like, well OMA, at least they do say, we don't have that physical signature. But I think in terms of process, it does seem to be a similar kind of a genealogy between them-

**JOHN CHOI** Yes, definitely. And even in the physical aesthetic, OMA does have a signature as well - like everyone invariably does have culturally within the organisation, within a team of people would find certain repeating patterns in the way certain things get expressed, in material choices in the way that it's composed. There is much more, as we say, emphasis on the process. Going back to what I was saying, because I think our practice, we haven't spent as much time obsessively pursuing a particular aesthetic pursuit. And we see the power of architecture equally or more so in those other dimensions. Maybe it could be in five or ten years time, if we were having this conversation, because we feel more at ease with the process and understanding how we can make the work relevant - it's not necessarily one or the other. I think both can exist. Both ways of practicing can exist in a project. You can have projects that have a strong distinct visual signature, that has its own logic and trajectory. The work can equally be performed and spatially organised itself and evolve by the time, that can have other effects in society. So they're not necessarily mutually distinct. It's just the way that we understand different architects' work. It's sometimes channelled through one lens or the way you start to talk about it and portray it may throw a more narrow lens at the work. When you look at the work of fullness of time or you see how it's being used, et cetera, and maybe more overlapping ways that it actually exists in the world.

Yeah, and even in an architect's trajectory, they may start more focused on one end of the spectrum and then over time, refine interest in the way that they can have an effect in other ways. So it could be for our practice, because our way of practicing has been more embedded in understanding how it has multiple effects, that's where our strength has been drawn. But it may be that because we get comfortable in operating in that dimension, our interests start to focus more in areas that we haven't necessarily looked at as much and want to sharpen or make that particular. That may come into the fold later in our lives as well. So it's hard to know-

**KIEN SITU** That makes me think of early Le Corbusier and late Le Corbusier.

**JOHN CHOI** Yeah, you'll see a few architects work or sometimes it's usually the other way in the past, because I think that sometimes architects have been quite dogmatic about particular conceptual ideas earlier in their career and they become more complex, it certainly contextually is and functionally it works in that urban setting later in their career. We're probably doing the reverse. See what happens!

So the works that you've got here are still relatively small objects, do you have interest in creating more spatial and large scale works that start to overlap into the field of architecture?

**KIEN SITU** Absolutely. I think that as an immediate and the first kind of channel to

physically create things and this practice as it's begun has been great. I'd love for some of the lessons or discoveries in it to be channelled towards architecture and for architecture to also inform that as well. That both things can inform each other, I think that could be a really interesting tension. Like the works they're sort of incomplete images they can be filled out, I suppose, by the viewer. In their isolation, I sometimes look at them in that way too, as these dismantled components, but what would they be together? And I casted a few things which weren't shown downstairs, I've been casting a few screens, floor slabs, bricks even. I've been imagining how this might be arranged or expressed, especially so given the opportunity of space, one day to move into that realm. I think that would be really interesting. To investigate typologies as well, which are probably more Eastern in origin, such as the pavilion, would be a really interesting thing too. Imagine that though - if you were making every piece and then assembling all those pieces as this idea of the singular and forming this whole. Another German word, the *gesamtkunstwerk*, like a complete work of art, could be an interesting thing to explore. To fabricate the materials which can then go on to make the architecture or space.

**JOHN CHOI** Look I reckon that could be fantastic because I can see you've got a real keen interest in all of that. So as you explain it, I can physically imagine the works, large enough and particularly spatializing. If you're arranging it within a larger gallery space, then you can really start to play with how people move through, how people might pause, maybe even, use - if there is a usage part of that experience. It will cross over into the whole participatory and performative dimensions in an art practice as well. Yeah, I think everything you spoke about in terms of your interests would lend itself well to explore a larger scale where you can start to shape how people flow and experience it.

**KIEN SITU** That's nice to hear. Thank you. When I was working at Panovscott Architects, my favourite thing to work on was an exhibition at Tin Sheds, I'm not sure if you saw it, it was called *A Small Exhibition*. What I loved about that was exactly what you described as well, how architecture can be a channel in conjunction with sometimes different fields to become a bit more participatory, to allow people to participate. It can also inform movement and circulation through space, but with moments of pause, which are typically part of like the architect's spatial repertoire.

**JOHN CHOI** Well I love Panovscot's work and I think get a sense of what you might have learnt through working with them. I think there's crossover with the work that you're doing as an artist as well. So, yeah, look forward to seeing some of your larger work as you tackle your career.

**KIEN SITU** Thank you.

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The recorded conversation between Kien Situ & John Coi took place at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in 2020, as part of *Holding Patterns: Kien Situ*, 9 July – 2 August 2020.

**4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art acknowledges the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the Land on which this interview took place.**

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**Images (top to bottom):**

- 1) Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Wall Plate)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 48 x 48 x 8cm. Courtesy the artist.
- 2) Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Stele)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 128 x 64 x 32cm. Courtesy the artist.
- 3) *Holding Patterns Part One: Kien Situ* (installation view) Front, Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Column)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 136 x 24 x 24cm. Back left: Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Scroll)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 88 x 64 x 8cm. Courtesy the artist.
- 4) *Holding Patterns Part One: Kien Situ* (installation view) Left: Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Wall Plate)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 48 x 48 x 8cm. Centre: Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Scroll)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 88 x 64 x 8cm. Right: Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Column)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 136 x 24 x 24cm. Courtesy the artist.
- 5) Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Wall Plate)*, 2020, Chinese Mò ink, gypsum plaster, 48 x 48 x 8cm. Courtesy the artist.
- 6) *Holding Patterns Part One: Kien Situ* (installation view). Courtesy the artist.