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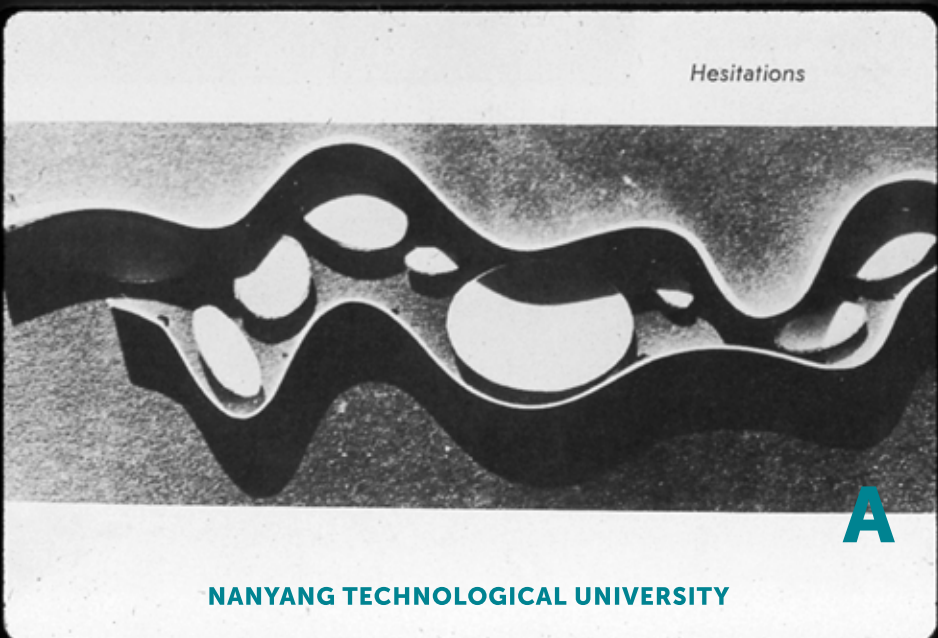
NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE

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THE LAB
14 FEBRUARY – 14 JUNE 2020

MARY OTIS STEVENS.
THE i PRESS SERIES

Hesitations



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NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

MARY OTIS STEVENS. THE i PRESS SERIES

Mary Otis Stevens is a pioneering American architect based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Both in partnership with Thomas F. McNulty and later with Design Guild, Stevens linked architectural projects to her civic involvements and to a radical re-envisioning of spatial/social relationships in various media. This presentation showcases her sketches, drawings, and designs that provide insight into concepts and visualisations around people, space, cities, and society. In the context of the Cold War and American political activism of the 1960s, Stevens' work reflects her background in philosophy and her commitment to de-centralise hierarchies. The themes of active citizen participation in government, integrated planning, and genuine risk-taking to make substantial change in people's lives remain relevant and a crucial means of incorporating a social context into the practice of architecture and other activities affecting human wellbeing for each and for all.

This research presentation links to her role as a co-founder of i Press, an influential publisher of books on architecture and urban theory. It also connects to NTU CCA Singapore's ongoing inquiry into urbanism after the Bandung Conference of 1955, including the work of Singaporean Architects William S.W. Lim (b. 1932) and Datuk Seri Lim Chong Keat (b. 1930), a contemporary of Mary Otis Stevens at MIT. Lim's books *Cities for People: Reflections of a Southeast Asian Architect* (1990) and *Incomplete Urbanism: A Critical Urban Strategy for Emerging Economies* (2012) have been explored at NTU CCA Singapore in multiple ways, including the exhibition *Incomplete Urbanism: Attempts of Critical Spatial Practice* (2016), *CITIES FOR PEOPLE* NTU CCA Ideas Fest 2016/2017, and the recently published book *The Impossibility of Mapping (Urban Asia)* (2020).

Stevens and McNulty founded i Press in 1968 in association with the New York Publisher George Braziller. Between 1969 and 1974 they published five books in the i Press series on the human environment (see page 2) Each book used architecture and urban design as tools to explore alternatives to dysfunctional social and cultural practices—and their underlying assumptions in societies then dominant—as well as applying these concepts to those emerging. Writing about i Press in 1974, Stevens reflected that, “Although the authors and i Press itself have tended toward a planning and architectural orientation, this background has not necessarily narrowed the contents or perspectives of either. It has, however, provided a point of departure for visualising how urban and industrial processes affect and indeed radically shape and alter the lives of most people in most societies today.”¹



Thomas F. McNulty and Mary Otis Stevens at the Lincoln House, Massachusetts, 1965.

Acknowledgements:

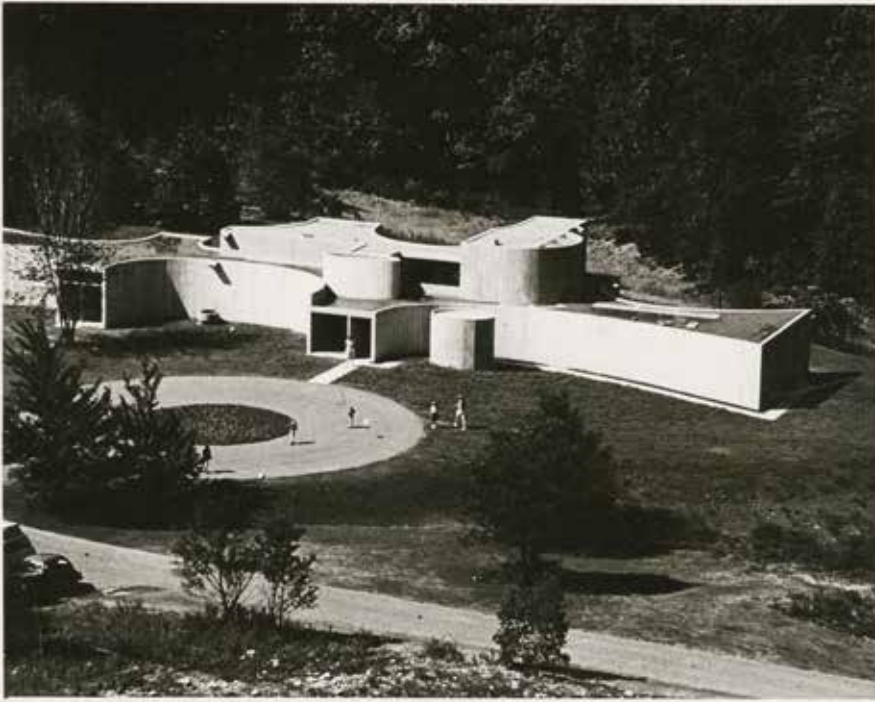
We would like to thank **Mary Otis Stevens** and the **MIT Museum Architecture and Design Collections** for their kind collaboration and support.

All images (except pages 4 and 5):

Courtesy of the artist and MIT Museum Architecture and Design Collections.



Mary Otis Stevens, *The i Press Series*, 14 February – 26 April 2020, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, The Lab, installation view.



MIT Museum calls **Mary Otis Stevens** "one of the most important female architects in the Northeast during the 1960s and 1970s." Stevens graduated from Smith College in 1949 with a degree in philosophy. Beginning in her undergraduate years she was active in the civil rights movement, presaging a lifelong commitment to social, political, and civic activism. Stevens entered the architecture programme at MIT in 1953, graduating with an SBArch in 1956. Influences at MIT included Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen, Kevin Lynch, and Buckminster Fuller, who was also a family friend. Stevens worked for The Architects' Collaborative (TAC) before launching a practice with MIT faculty member Thomas F. McNulty (1919-1984) in 1957.

Stevens and McNulty practiced together until 1974 and were most known for the Lincoln House—the communal concrete and glass curvilinear house they designed for their own family in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a rural suburb of Boston. It won international attention.

Above: Aerial view of the Lincoln House, Massachusetts.

Right: Mary Otis Stevens, *The internal structure of things*, drawing, 10 February 1961.

Right above: Mary Otis Stevens, *The Enclave*, mixed media.

With the collapse circa 1970 of the Modern Movement, which had never rooted in the American society, Stevens began her search for vernacular origins of American architecture. She was fortunate to receive two successive Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1975-1978) to continue her pursuit. That led to Stevens teaching part time at the Boston Architectural Center founded in 1899 with the mission to provide professional instruction for students and others interested in the practice of architecture or the allied arts, "especially those whose employment might interfere with such education in day schools and universities." As a faculty and Board member Stevens helped the BAC obtain accreditation. It is now the degree granting Boston Architectural College.



Mary Otis Stevens, together with colleagues and students in the Boston area, established Design Guild (1973-1992), a multi-disciplinary collaborative committed to sustainable and socially responsible developments. Its mission statement—"to preserve the past while building new, and to build new what will be worth preserving in the future"—guided its professional teams and daily operations selecting projects, most in the public domain, that were process as opposed to product oriented.



A member of the Boston Society of Architects since 1973, Stevens served on its Board, co-founding Architects for Social Responsibility (ASR) to promote sustainable architecture and planning. In association with other professional societies, ASR sponsored public educational programmes on environmental issues, organised design charrettes dealing with the adaptive re-use of demobilised military bases like Fort Devens, and similar public facilities. ASR published handbooks on sustainable architectural practice and urban planning for professionals that were widely distributed by the BSA to other AIA chapters and the interested public.

This research presentation in The Lab is organised by NTU CCA Singapore and curated by **Karin Oen**, Deputy Director, Curatorial Programmes, in collaboration with **Ute Meta Bauer**, Founding Director, NTU CCA Singapore, and Professor, NTU ADM; **Mary Otis Stevens**; **Gary Van Zante** and **Jennifer Tran**, MIT Museum Architecture and Design Collections. All images courtesy Mary Otis Stevens and MIT Museum.



Above:
Mary Otis Stevens,
Cultural Collage,
mixed media.

Right:
Mary Otis Stevens,
*Establishing a new
nucleus*, drawing.

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A national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University, the Centre focuses on *Spaces of the Curatorial*. It brings forth innovative and experimental forms of emergent artistic and curatorial practices that intersect the present and histories of contemporary art embedded in social-political spheres with other fields of knowledge.

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Enquiries:

ntuccaevents@ntu.edu.sg

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Tel +65 6339 6503

RESIDENCIES STUDIOS

Blocks 37 and 38 Malan Road,
Singapore 109452 and 109441

RESEARCH CENTRE AND OFFICE

Block 6 Lock Road, #01-09/10,

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