

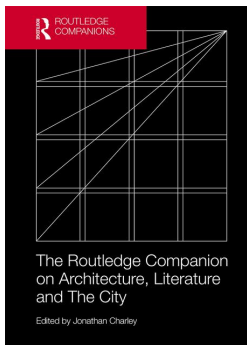
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City

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### Domestic digressions

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-4>

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**Published online on: 17 Aug 2018**

**How to cite :-** Lilian Chee. 17 Aug 2018 ,*Domestic digressions from: The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City* Routledge.

Accessed on: 08 Oct 2018

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613154-4>

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## Domestic digressions

### Interrogating Singaporean public housing through its literary forms

*Lilian Chee*

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With over eighty-two percent of the Singaporean population residing in public housing flats, the setting of the public housing estate is, not unexpectedly, a recurring subject in Singapore's post-independence literature, the latter produced chiefly after the nation-state's self-governance in 1965. Comparable to the earliest modernist social housing experiments in Europe including Germany (1920–30s) and United Kingdom (1930–60s) in its ambitions to obliterate poor urban living conditions and to improve the population's general wellbeing, Singapore's enduring and widespread public housing programme exceeded its European precedents as the most strident state-directed built exemplar. The Republic's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared in the 40th year of the housing programme that the project 'epitomise(s) the success of Singaporean society and remain(s) a constant source of national pride'.<sup>1</sup>

Public housing in Singapore is prolific in terms of its production, subscription and influence. Embedded in a network of fiscal, social, political, architectural, ideological and legal threads, public housing architecture is commissioned and administered by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), a state-regulated body which has managed public housing on the island since its inception in 1960. Within its first four years, the HDB rehoused 400,000 people in 51,000 newly built units, an achievement which surpassed the 32-year output of its colonial predecessor, the Singapore Improvement Trust.<sup>2</sup> The fact that public housing is simultaneously a formidable political instrument of reform and control,<sup>3</sup> as well as the architecture of the mundane, creates a site laden with contradictions. Located at the intersections of institutional power, state control, individual autonomy and self-definition, its architecture has generated literary structures and narrative plots spun around such contradictions.

This chapter argues that Singaporean literature raises new architectural readings and figures, emerging patterns of spatial relationships and embedded desires or biases. It brings these aspects to bear upon public housing's architectural effects, forms and surfaces. Such readings are possible because views on public housing are diametrically opposed in architecture and literature. The housing typology has been delineated in architectural and urban planning narratives through its quantitative and efficacious precision, evidenced through the housing agency's ongoing research into finely calibrated plot ratios, built environment densities, occupancy distributions, planning statistics and rigorously fine-tuned unit dimensions. As a corollary

to this approach, literary works (fiction, poetry and drama) focus on themes such as ambivalence and affect, and emphasize precarity, subjectivity and emotion as key to understanding the physical, sociocultural and psychological effects of daily life in this architecture. Offering more than an alternative perspective, it raises the impossibility of describing public housing's modernity exclusively through normative architectural and urban planning models, which are unsurprisingly widespread given Singapore's successful urban planning imperatives.

Yet particularly in the Singapore context, the use of literature as a critique for architecture is fraught. In 1969, Lee Kuan Yew declared the patent futility of literature over the necessity of economic development for a land-hungry and resource-scarce nation, adding emphatically that 'poetry is a luxury we cannot afford.'<sup>4</sup> This statement has since relegated Singaporean literary production to a marginal activity, while simultaneously according it a subversive influence. The irony of pairing Singaporean literature with its architecture must be considered within the city-state's wider postcolonial and developmentalist contexts.<sup>5</sup> Here, we glimpse the seeds of Lee's prophetic denial of poetry in deference to economic superiority.

Part of the British Straits settlement (until 1959), as well as the short-lived federation with Malaysia (1963–65), the independent nation's earliest singular ambition was heavily invested in building up its economic base as compensation for its smallness and lack of natural resources. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) actively and strategically exercised the tenets of a developmental nation<sup>6</sup> by forging a formidable economy and installing globally competitive public infrastructure. This strategy included growing its huge public housing stock and managing politically sensitive land reclamation works to increase the developmental capacity of the island. One of the 'Four Asian Tigers' responsible for the Asian Pacific Rim's economic miracle of the 1980s, Singapore's built environment's growth narrative has been bolstered by a persistent rhetoric of crisis and survival,<sup>7</sup> a melodramatic rhetoric if also a befitting one for a country without its own hinterland. Maintaining close diplomatic and trade relationships with the United States and Britain, Singapore fashioned itself by emulating, and at points retaining, some of its colonizer's educational, infrastructural, legal and administrative structures, particularly those that had proven to be economically strategic.<sup>8</sup> For the same reason, its postcolonial struggle for identity and nationhood can be differentiated from other independent colonies because while urban progress signaled the way to modernity and liberation for the latter, the Singapore 'model', as sociologist Chua Beng Huat argues, is peculiar for its ambivalence towards revolution and change, being undergirded by economic gains and capitalistic stakes.<sup>9</sup> For Singapore, modernity was a route to economic prowess, and fiscal power indeed became both the nation's means and its ends.

Nonetheless an explanation that overemphasizes the forces and outcomes of Singapore's miraculous economy (e.g. the architectural and urban planning discourses which tout the HDB model as a 'model'), ultimately fails to show how significantly these economically-driven urban formations transform social relationships and cultural production.<sup>10</sup> The sociocultural shifts that respond to the cityscape's urban grammar of amnesia, speed, compression and congestion create their own aesthetic forms. In a city where buildings are disposable and land grows from the sea, there is an urgency to make sense of one's relationship to space. This acute sense of impermanence has percolated into Singaporean literature about public housing, posing as a counter discourse to the stable narrative of the HDB model. Yet, how can a literature, which is so uneasy about the space that calls it into being, be of critical importance to architectural knowledge?

In her monograph that juxtaposes the urban formations of Singapore, Taipei and Seoul against its literary forms, the literary theorist Jini Kim Watson attempts to tease out differences

in how industrialized postcolonial space is written about. Drawing on the architectural critic Jeffrey Kipnis<sup>11</sup> use of the term 'New Asian city' to categorize the metropolises of newly industrialized Asian countries such as Singapore, Seoul and Taipei, Watson contends that there is an intrinsic relationship between the 'material configurations' of these New Asian cities and their 'aesthetic forms'.<sup>12</sup> She argues that it is productivity and production rather than civic struggle that influence the formation of such cities,

...the city is conceived first and foremost as a production platform – for the production of surplus values, laboring bodies, and national subjects – and less as a site of traditional civic, ceremonial or economic transactions.<sup>13</sup>

In saying so, Watson challenges the binary oppositions between the material and the literary, or the physical and representational spaces associated with these cities. She argues that although such cities might be persuasively described through infrastructural and technocratic terms, these cities are equally artistic and aesthetic constructions. Thus, the literature of the New Asian City is more often than not constructed through the mammoth, rapid and frequently traumatic 'urban and architectural processes as principal social forces'.<sup>14</sup> Differentiating itself from literary analyses which attempt to uncover a close correlation between text and physical reality such that the former 'reflects' the latter, Watson's argument draws on Henri Lefebvre's<sup>15</sup> multi-dimensional conception of space as something that exists simultaneously on 'material, practical, historical, ideological and imaginative levels'.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, she emphasizes that the literatures of these cities matter, in particular for the way the 'contradictions of spatial formations are narrated and imagined in [them]'.<sup>17</sup> It implies that the literary forms of these cities are not mere derivations or annotations of the cities' physical forms but rather that the literatures might produce other (representational) spaces, which reflect but are also critical of the physical cities that inspire them. This reading corresponds to the literary critic Frederic Jameson's argument that literature is necessarily an 'indirect figuration' of the work's social and political contexts, in that '... the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction'.<sup>18</sup>

This essay shares Watson's dialectical positioning of literary texts to architecture and urban planning. Or as Lefebvre insists, it is concerned with what 'occupies the interstices between [them]'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, what are the intersections between representations of space (architecture, urban planning) and representational space (literature), and what do these intersections offer as forms of knowledge? Also, in reading the literary texts from the opposite direction to Watson – moving from architecture towards literature – I contend that literature can illuminate the blind spots in architectural discourse. As per Lefebvre, there are two polarized views which bracket the possibility of 'survival' in Singapore, and these perspectives describe the dichotomy between the efficient representations of space (urban and architectural development) and the longing for representational space (poetry).

On the one hand, the current Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong articulates the necessity of steady and stable development for national prosperity:

We are not in a revolution, tearing down, destroying, starting from scratch. We are in a stable and constructive state, building, building on what we have achieved. ...We as a country we have to be ordinary people creating an exceptional nation because we are a small country in this part of the world and to survive you have to be exceptional.<sup>20</sup>

In comparison, the poet and writer Audre Lorde attests to the vitality and fluidity of poetry for action and life:

...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.<sup>21</sup>

This chapter situates itself in-between these two polarities. I argue that literary vitality is important for any architectural critique because it offers an imaginative dimension, an aspect eluded by an architectural pragmatism that dominates a developmentalist economy like Singapore. At the same time, the role of literature in a new Asian city is also particular in its challenges and constraints: contending with demands for a national imagery and language, while also differentiating the writer's personal voice from the national collective's. The postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha underscores that this 'double writing' which has competing nationalist and individualized voices ultimately incorporates a 'nationalist pedagogy' as well as the 'prodigious, living principles of the people as a contemporaneity'.<sup>22</sup> Read in this light, it becomes evident why much Singaporean literature is often foregrounded by the question of space, especially the space of home. Space continues to be the most physically and mentally contested asset in Singapore. And it is striking too how this struggle is frequently played out in the two ways outlined by the epigraphs above. On the one hand, the construction and conception of space is controlled by a pragmatism necessary to achieve 'exceptional' results; on the other hand, the yearning for individual expression is enacted through spaces carved from 'the experiences of our daily lives'. The literary theorist Robbie B.H. Goh emphasizes that the built environment occupies a contradictory position in Singaporean literature given that it inspires individual action or feeling yet also obliges the writer to participate in the literary formation of a shared, symbolic space:

The poetic treatment of space often becomes foregrounded, forming not merely a neutral and passive site in which action and the articulation of internal thoughts and feelings are played out, but instead taking on a central symbolic role as the means of constructing a shared communal and ultimately national space. In this sense Singapore's poetry of emergent nationalism once again reinforces, and is reinforced by, a kind of national ideology...<sup>23</sup>

Consistent with Singapore's emphasis on urban planning and architecture as key agendas of a developmental state, the prevalent architectural discourse on public housing is written (and read) almost exclusively from a pragmatic perspective. In architecture, the subject of HDB housing is delineated through abstract, detached, authoritative or even moralistic modes. Yet, its literary excursions insist on public housing's obduracy, tactility, fragility and vulnerability. Through the early works of Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun, Malaysia-born novelist Goh Poh Seng, Singaporean poet and painter Arthur Yap, as well as more contemporary writing from Singaporean artist, writer and curator Tania de Rozario, this essay outlines why a profoundly productivist understanding of space, marked by efficiency and

standardization is not as monolithic and uncontested in the Singaporean psyche as assumed. These early literatures show instead a tense ambivalence towards the evolving nature of a capitalist city bent on becoming global. The conception of such a productivist postcolonial space is flawed and fractured, particularly when it intersects with housing and living. In this sense too, literature is critical to architecture – first as a document of affective spatial history, and second as a manifesto towards desired spatial futures. I argue that Singaporean literature shifts HDB depiction from technocratic to affective modes. Through these texts, the architecture of public housing become entanglements between representations of space and representational space: being at the same time literal and figural; concrete and immaterial; present and latent; ideological and whimsical.

### **Standing dominoes: standardization, serialization and the national psyche in postcolonial space**

The housing situation prior to HDB's takeover in 1960 was dire. Overcrowding was rampant because Southern Chinese immigrants flocked into the city centre to seek jobs and thereafter chose to live in the same area. Radical measures were required to alleviate not just the standards of living but also to combat the spread of tuberculosis which thrived in crowded tenements.<sup>24</sup> Chinatown was the crucible of urban squalor with approximately '300,000 people ... living in temporary squalid dwellings in squatter areas with no sanitation, water or any of the basic health facilities and another 250,000 in ramshackle shophouses within the city area...'<sup>25</sup> When the first HDB Chairman, Lim Kim San, visited Chinatown in the early 1960s, his own anecdotal account cohered with official documentation:

I went into a three-story shophouse with one lavatory and two bathrooms. We counted 200 tenants living there. It was so dark and damp. It was an inhuman and degrading existence. Underneath the staircase was a single plank. A man was lying on the plank. He had rented it. That was his home! And he was lying down covered by a blanket; the thick red blanket made in China. I paused to ask him if he was sick: 'Why are you covering yourself with a thick blanket?' He replied: 'I am covering myself out of respect for you. I am wearing only undershorts. My brother is wearing my pants.' They were too poor to afford clothing. In those days, there were shops which pulled clothing and shoes off the dead to sell them.<sup>26</sup>

The ensuing urban reforms to combat such squalor and poverty were widespread if also often unsympathetic to private sentiments. Sweeping changes were supported by the Land Acquisitions Act of 1966, a legislation that gave the state sole right to acquire private land for public good, at a price it deemed commensurate with the value of that land. The Act allowed the State to acquire large land parcels. While the legislation enabled a steady supply of public housing stock, it also meant that the state gradually became the most important landowner. As all public housing projects were eventually undertaken by the HDB, the housing landscape was transformed by new policy guidelines that regularized living standards that flattened differences and homogenized both the domestic environment and its occupants. The priorities for the State were standards and the status quo, not difference (Figure 3.1).

The struggle against such conformity and homogeneity is the central theme of playwright Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole* (1985). A satirical account of cultural tradition



Figure 3.1 Singapore's public housing flats (HDB) in the foreground. Photo: Lin Derong, 2017.

clashing with national progress, the play, performed as a monologue by a single actor on stage, was written in bilingual versions for English and Chinese audiences. The tussle is about space, or the lack thereof to house a coffin that is too big for the hole it is meant to be buried in. Its metanarrative revolves around the contest for land to bury the dead versus land reserved for national housing. This is manifested in a young grandson's recurring dream about his futile attempts to bury his grandfather in a custom-made coffin. His grandfather's wealth translates into a coffin of substantial quality, requiring the strength of sixteen men to hoist it. The coffin, which is noncompliant with standard type and size, cannot fit into the burial hole at the cemetery, 'We stood there. We looked at the coffin. We looked at the hole. We looked at each other. All the crying suddenly stopped. But no one dared to laugh'.<sup>27</sup> The play details the grandson's struggles with the absurdities of Singaporean bureaucracy that suggests amongst other things, changing coffins, sawing away the excess bits of the ornate one, or just burying the deceased without a coffin:

The coffin is too big?' he asked.  
 'Yeah. Too big.'  
 'The hole too small?'  
 'Yeah. Too small.'  
 ...'Umm,' he said. 'According to the data you two have provided me with, several options exist...  
 'One, change to a smaller coffin.  
 'Two, change to a private cemetery.  
 'Three, chop off the extra wood on the sides of the coffin.  
 Four, simply remove the body and bury it wrapped in bamboo sheets.'<sup>28</sup>

Despite all efforts to mitigate the impasse, the young man's pleas are thwarted by the efficient cogwheels of modernization, standardization and bureaucracy. He is forced to act spontaneously, doing what is necessary to 'save face'.

... this is my grandfather getting buried. It is not the bottling of soya sauce; it is not the canning of pineapple cubes; it is not the laying of bricks for your HDB flats and it is not the drawing of rectangles for your carpark lots.<sup>29</sup>

To the government representative in charge of burials, the grandson blurts out his disgust at his deceased grandfather being treated no better than a mass-produced object, not unlike canned pineapples, bottled soya sauce, or the laying of bricks for HDB flats. The officer re-lents in the end only because he realizes that there are 200 people waiting at the grave and did not want a misunderstanding that the authorities were 'being disrespectful of traditions, as being hard and unaccommodating to even the dead'.<sup>30</sup> The monologue, which is by turns light-hearted, bizarre and serious, recalls this farcical encounter. Through these two mundane but embodied objects – a coffin and a burial hole in the cemetery – the play contrasts the hegemony of national development, abstract justifications of land scarcity and the need for standardization with the tangibility and irregularity of the human body.

Touching on Singapore's growing homogeneity, relentless bureaucracy and distinct obsession with standardization, Kuo chose to iterate the abstract forms of pragmatism – ideological, institutional and spatial – through a particularly embodied perspective, a Chinese burial ritual gone wrong. Detained previously under the Internal Security Act between 1976 and 1980 for alleged communist activities and stripped of his Singapore citizenship until it was reinstated in 1992, Kuo's previous works had heavy or overt political criticism. Nevertheless, for *The Coffin*, he employs for the first time, a more open allegorical mode of address, which is markedly spatial in character.

The disjuncture between coffin and hole stand for the spatiocultural displacement of a diasporic migrant society caught in a postcolonial capitalist web where only productivist subjectivities are tolerated. In this case, the argument for a burial plot to preserve a diasporic Chinese tradition stands little chance against land policies geared towards more productive and progressive purposes. Confucianism with its emphasis on a 'mirror relationship between the ruler and the subject, and between the patriarch and his family' is seen as compatible with the pragmatism and social hierarchy demanded in Singapore.<sup>31</sup> However in *The Coffin*, the hierarchies and loyalties demanded by a Confucianist stance are in tension when the grandson decides to honour his grandfather over the laws of the State. 'The containment of the body and the rituals that go with a traditional Chinese burial can also be read as a displacement of a desire to maintain the myth of a unified and fixed subjectivity' despite the competing subject positions at stake.<sup>32</sup> Here, Kuo distinguishes the often-conflated entities of 'family' and 'State'. In his play, the abstract notions of subjectivity and self are embodied in one's right to space – the right of the deceased to a communion with the land ('ash to ash'), and the right of his family to visit their ancestor's new place of rest. Indeed, the cemetery space acts almost like an extension of the family's domestic quarters. This is reinforced particularly in the observance of *Qingming*, a yearly tomb-sweeping ritual where descendants bring food, wine and flowers to the final resting space of their ancestors. They spend the day cleaning the tombstones, tidying up the surroundings, cutting grass and weeding the area. The containment of the body in the columbaria has thus a greater effect than curtailing a tradition. It also truncates a spatiotemporal imagination concerned with the continuity of Chinese family 'life' beyond the house, and into the grave.



By 1985, the same year that *The Coffin* was first staged, the HDB had expropriated land from 21 burial grounds and 120,000 graves had been exhumed for urban development, particularly for public housing.<sup>33</sup> Exhumation exercises continue to be carried out today, with cremation almost entirely replacing burial rituals in Singapore. Where once burial sites were distinguished for their wild, open and hilly landscapes, these being aligned with favourable *feng-shui* (geomantic) elements, cremated remains are now contained in small, standardized and identical niches located in nondescript columbaria. This modernized practice is at odds with traditional Confucian customs that emphasize the importance of sustaining a good relationship between the living and the dead. According to these customs, the dead must be appeased through proper burial rites and propitious geomantic principles of tombstone geometries, graveyard sites and their specific orientation.<sup>34</sup> Customarily, the journey beyond mundane life is viewed as inevitable, and preparations are made with a view to bearing the costs of often elaborate funeral rituals and securing an appropriate burial plot. *The Coffin* embodies the simultaneously mundane and extraordinary struggles of coping with Singapore's postcolonial developmentalist ideologies. It outlines the dilemma of a national psyche that is irrevocably split between state and self; the space of the nation and the space of the family/self – a relationship which has, on the contrary, been frequently portrayed as seamless, intertwined and indistinguishable in the Singaporean psyche.

The same fracturing of self and state can also be traced through competing spaces, spatial details and perceptions in the earlier Singaporean proto-Bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Kuala Lumpur-born writer Goh Poh Seng. This text, like Kuo's *The Coffin*, is currently part of the Singaporean school curriculum. If Kuo's protagonist accepted standardization as inevitable, Goh's main character is tethered at the precipice of a 'brave new world'. Goh's novel – hailed as 'the first serious attempt to represent critically contemporary Singaporean experience'<sup>35</sup> – charts 'the early years of the PAP's (People Action Party's) ascendancy, where the average citizen has little to do but observe the nation's rapid progress'.<sup>36</sup> The newly constructed public housing was both boon and bane: hygiene was prioritized, squalor eradicated but traditional practices, habits and customs, which appeared to hamper efficiency and productivity, were suppressed and removed.

In contrast to the organic layout and growth of informal settlements or *kampongs* which housed a large majority of Singapore's population before public housing was formalized and regularized, the public housing estate was strikingly repetitive, and formed a vast urban landscape of identical units and identical blocks. As the earliest designs of the HDB estate focused solely on functionality, the built density of each estate, the number of occupants and the types and numbers of amenities were mathematically determined.<sup>37</sup> This rationalized environment, often constructed on forcibly cleared land, echoes the formal geometries and efficiency of Le Corbusier's unrealized *Ville Radieuse* (1933), an idea that emphasized the economies of uniformity:

If we are to industrialize construction methods, we can no longer construct individual, custom-made buildings, each having its own peculiarities; we must build entire streets, entire districts. We must therefore study closely the basic unit, the human dwelling, and determine the right module and mass produce it. The regular and quiet pattern formed by these units would then extend, ... to vast architectural compositions.<sup>38</sup>

Corbusier envisioned a 'perfect form' underpinned by the strict repetition of apartment units set in identical blocks, arranged in a grid and planned according to rationalized zones. The outcomes of such standardization were efficient transport, healthy living, and calibrated

spaces for work, leisure and consumption: 'The radiant city, inspired by physical and human laws, proposes to bring machine age man essential pleasures... Sun in the house; a view of the sky through large windows, trees he can see from his house'.<sup>39</sup> Yet this *tabula rasa* vision aggravates the disconnect between building and site, 'Instead of buildings set in a park, we now have buildings set in a parking lot'.<sup>40</sup> Goh's novel traverses a post-independent Singapore of the 1970s where the rate of economic development was matched by a rapid overhaul of public infrastructure including the construction of identical HDB neighbourhoods, ambitious land reclamation works, and a city consciously remodeling itself to become global.

In front of him was a long line of people queuing for the bus. Hundreds and hundreds pouring out of offices, lining up for buses, with a quiet exasperation... [T]he bus dropped him off at the main road around the corner where their block of flats stood, beside the other identical blocks arranged in a pattern of standing dominoes.<sup>41</sup>

The International Style was adopted as the status quo architectural language for Singaporean public housing. The discourse on public housing has however, remained technical, focused primarily on its impact and contribution to the urban plan, and the evolution of its variant forms in response to function and changing demographics. At the same time, it could be said that the HDB's adoption of the International Style signals the preference for a particular aesthetic, one which could opportunistically become neutral, flexible, international, one which eschewed tradition and would not jar with an indigenous landscape of crowded tenements and informal hamlets (*'kampong'* housing) that had been obliterated or remodeled on the grounds of overcrowding and poor health.

Ideologically, it is significant that a modernist aesthetic is represented in Singapore's largest and most enduring architectural project. If in Europe, the International Style was a counter-establishment choice, its wholesale adoption by the HDB in the 1960s meant that the tools and forms of modernization, normally paired with ideologies of modernity, had been neatly decoupled. The result is a discourse of public housing minus politics and public. Read from an architectural perspective, Goh's novel is critical in its attempt to wonder aloud: How does one make sense of such major spatial upheavals happening in one's city, and even inside one's home? How can one talk about these changes in a way that relates to what one can understand, to that which makes sense to one's body? If postcolonial Singapore is a utopian construction of streets and homes without filth, crime and poverty, what then keeps its people up at night? What dreams do they dream?

The protagonist of Goh's novel is 18-year-old Kwang Meng, a lower-middle class teenager who works as a shipping clerk and lives with his parents and siblings in one of the identical domino-like HDB blocks at the Tiong Bahru estate. An area of mangrove swamps and low hills previously dotted with Chinese cemeteries before it was cleared by the colonial administration in 1925, Tiong Bahru was one of the earliest colonial urban renewal sites. Here, squatter settlements were systematically removed, private land acquired for public housing, and the first Singapore Improvement Trust flats designed by the colonial housing unit were constructed in 1931. In 1960, the HDB took over housing provision in the area and subsequently erected 900 flats for lower-income families.<sup>42</sup> Thus, while Kwang Meng's nondescript estate is forgettable from the occupant's perspective, the actual neighbourhood upon which this novel was based is in fact symbolically significant in urban renewal terms.

The novel follows Kwang Meng's unsettled existence and yearning to surpass his social class and education. He has a relationship with a bar girl Lucy whom he loves but only surreptitiously because he fears the social repercussions of their partnership. His angst is

suppressed each night as he returns to the family flat, and retires to his bed in a somnambulant state, 'once more back in his world',<sup>43</sup> as though the confines of the flat could anaesthetize the emotions that assailed him during the day. Then, Kwang Meng's father suffers a stroke, rendering his son the sole breadwinner at the prime of the boy's youth. He comes to terms that a city grown from manicured trees, criss-crossed by streets without bicycles and with people who must shuttle indefinitely between home and work, cannot accommodate those with wandering dreams. The dreams of an individual are set aside to accommodate the needs of family, and the aspirations of a nation:

Kwang Meng got up and leaned over the balcony. The clump of trees below and a little down the street stood like a neighbourhood family group.... Life went on as usual in the other blocks of flats. Kwang Meng felt a restlessness he knew not how to dissipate, and a coming of time he did not know how to manage (p. 81).

The novel closes with the young man looking out at the identical public housing flats in the horizon, finally reconciled that he will never escape his father's mundane life, and that he will be no different from all those like him who must eke out a living, no matter how insignificant their lives may seem, in those identical housing blocks. Significantly, Kwang Meng's thinking, weeping and dreaming habitually happen outside the family flat, such as on his balcony or while he is swimming in the sea (Figure 3.2).

On his balcony, he is free to contemplate the shrinking labyrinthine Chinatown tenements, observe a receding shoreline reclaimed for national development and survey the



Figure 3.2 The common access balcony or corridor of a HDB flat. Photo: Lin Derong, 2017.

neighbourhood that he will inherit. His own housing block is neat and orderly. It is 'served by two lifts which, however, only had stops on the landings of the fourth, eighth and twelfth floors'.<sup>44</sup> It is a starkly different world from the double-storey shophouse in Chinatown where he was born. There, he lived cramped together with his extended family numbering thirteen persons, above a provision shop selling:

...dried salted fish, strings of reddish-brown Chinese sausages hanging from wire hooks, sacks of rice, tins of coconut oil, dishes of bean curd, bottles of black soya sauce, boxes of salted ducks' eggs preserved in black ash, candles of vermilion red, joss-sticks, dried oiled ducks, tinned margarine and bottles of Brand's Essence of Chicken; all those smells mingling with the smells of the often rubbish-choked monsoon gutters, especially during high tide, wafted back to him.<sup>45</sup>

Such a cacophony of colours, tastes and smells, once common to the organic development of domestic architectural typologies, was altered to accommodate the changing composition and densities of their occupants. These ranged from single-family dwellings, to multi-family and multi-tenanted lodgings. If the threshold between private and public were starkly defined in Kwang Meng's atomistic HDB existence, the memory of his childhood home had more indefinite boundaries and regions, merging what was collective with what was individual. Significantly, the memory comes back to Kwang Meng while he is taking the lift to his HDB flat. Drawing on Jean Paul Sartre's concept of the 'practico-inert object', Watson argues, that the seriality of the HDB flats and their standardized components including the lift, the corridor and the playground, render every unit and block into an object which metonymically stands for an authority.<sup>46</sup> Practico-inert objects include '[the] subway, policeman's uniform, checkbook, sidewalk, calendar... [and these are objects] which function like an institution, which replace direct human relationships with something more ordered and indirect'.<sup>47</sup> For the residents of the new HDB estates, the block stood precisely for the state and for the new values of community and nationhood, which as homeowners, they were now contractually bound to conform. Yet, the degree of conformity in Singaporean public housing, which is unusually high by any standards, cannot be attributed solely to state power. The sociologist Riaz Hassan argues that such radical housing reforms were possible only because there was hardly any resistance from the citizenry who demonstrated a 'transition syndrome' that prioritized 'materialism', 'social mobility' and 'economic rationality' over other more intangible qualities of life.<sup>48</sup> As such the city evolved from top-down interventions and mass mobilization of resources as new HDB towns were systematically planned and built across the whole nation. The estranged forms of the city, particularly the atomistic existence of public housing was accepted as a necessary inconvenience, and often experienced in a state of passive acquiescence. The characters in *If We Dream Too Long* are passive observers. They may be emotional about the disappearing city fabric but they are physically distant from a city that continues to evolve without their participation. They consume their city, not unlike tourists, whom we are persistently told in the novel increasingly define what modern Singapore should become. Hassan similarly argues that the HDB experience is withdrawn, thus creating a social order where the mass mobilization of resources is unmatched by necessary public engagement:

Pushed by stress, pulled by autonomy, people in the new high-density, high-rise public housing communities tend to withdraw into a private world, thereby creating a special environment which is characterized by inward-looking dwelling, personality, individualism, apathy and a sense of general insecurity.<sup>49</sup>

On a bus ride with an upper-middle-class trainee teacher Anne who is romantically interested in Kwang Meng, he expresses an ambivalence towards the city's physical transformations – simultaneously impressed with the machines used in the land reclamation works 'eating into the hills of Siglap' but also regretting that the seaside bungalows now 'stood pathetic, incongruous, looking over a vast stretch of yellow earth where the sea used to be'.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the narrative, the struggle for self-definition is contrasted against the frenetic pace and changing forms of the post-independent city. The city inflicts a claustrophobic effect on Kwang Meng. His office cubicle and the flat that he shares with his family are constrained by an over-rationalized work ethic and suffocating filial piety which he cannot shake off. He complains that 'his days have no spaciousness'.<sup>51</sup> Yet this is not claustrophobia caused by a lack of space. It is instead precipitated through the compression of time and space into repetitive high-rise and high-density architecture, defined primarily by their similar forms and functions:

...it is the overwhelming standardization of the abstract, functional space that produces Kwang Meng's unique feelings of claustrophobia; the density of the city was actually much reduced through urban renewal. The rationalization of space is less a signifier of violent urban renewal than it is an indication of the way the new nation-state's orientation toward productivity permeates all aspects of life. Here, a slightly different version of the concentricity of power – where production is directed toward the international market in the name of national survival – results in claustrophobia at the psychospacial level.<sup>52</sup>

The serial aesthetic of the new public housing estates fulfilled an egalitarian role of regularizing housing standards across different social classes. But more importantly, scholars have also argued that public housing's homogeneous aesthetics, and identical provision of spaces and facilities, were politically strategic, 'The public housing mechanism plays an important role in forming a homogenous working class majority'.<sup>53</sup> This majority, known as the 'heartlanders,' are the antithesis of the financially and socially mobile 'cosmopolitan' citizen. In his 1999 National Day Rally address, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who first introduced the term 'heartlander', emphasized that although the cosmopolitan citizen represented Singapore on the global front, it was the 'heartlander' who ensured homeland success.<sup>54</sup> Despite echoing a modernist bias towards mobility, Prime Minister Goh's statement correlated the pragmatism of the HDB flats with the trustworthiness of its occupants – the working-class citizenry who keep Singapore running efficiently. The HDB estates or the 'heartlands' have also acquired a kind of 'origin myth' which elevate their status into what the literary scholar Yeo Wei Wei calls an 'exclusionary space' with 'native' origins.<sup>55</sup>

It is a heartland space and the 'heartlander' which feature in Arthur Yap's poem of forty lines titled *2 mothers in a h d b playground* (1980). The poem recounts the saccharine-sweet if also banal existence of these mothers and their children through the women's conversations as their sons – Ah Beng and Kim Cheong – play with each other. Here, the 'heartlander' is gendered. She is a woman, a wife, a mother and a daughter. The conversation takes place in one of the generic playground facilities usually overlooked by surrounding HDB blocks. In the playground there is a sandpit, fibre-glass play-structures and wooden benches (Figure 3.3).

The playground is typically next to a carpark, and surrounded by other public housing facilities such as a kindergarten, the state-run People's Association office, a coffeeshop and several other smaller shops such as a sundry shop, a barber and a newsagent. The playground is usually shaded by trees, and although it is visible, it has some measure of privacy. Other



Figure 3.3 A HDB playground. Photo: Lin Derong, 2017.

than children, the playground is used by other groups at less busy times of the day, especially during the night. These groups include teenagers gathering for a rendezvous, young lovers looking for a quiet spot, foreign domestic helpers who walk their owners' dogs and take the opportunity to meet at the benches to chat and sometimes, foreign workers who use it for a gathering or to drink beer. The playground is a space of relief, in contrast to the identical units in identical blocks. Yap uses the playground as a setting where the two women's rivalry is played out through cheerful banter. Yet, the playground is also a space that the women visit to escape the claustrophobia of their flats where their lives are continually defined by their domestic chores – cooking, bathing, tuition, cleaning, child minding and doing laundry.

In Yap's *2 mothers*, the seemingly mundane chat may be read as a parody or as a critique of the social and spatial limitations of the women who, as housewives, have lives that clearly revolve around their sons and their husbands. Throughout the poem, the mothers are not defined as individuals (there is no 'I') except in the title where they are given their roles. The first part of the poem talks about the housewives' aspirations for their young sons, 'ah beng is so smart/ already he can watch tv & know the whole story// your kim cheong is also quite smart/ what boy is he in the exam?' But, in fact, what is even more significant is that more than half the poem focuses on how the home is consumed and defined through 'things' – the vitamins and supplements they feed their sons, the cars their husbands drive, and the imported domestic luxuries and fittings through which they claim ownership and power, 'ah beng's father spends so much, takes out the mosaic floor & wants/ to make terrazzo or what. // we also got new furniture, bought from diethelm./ the sofa is so soft/ i dare not sit. they all/ sit like don't want to get up. so expensive./ nearly two thousand dollars. sure must be good'.<sup>56</sup>

The poem converses through Singlish, a colloquial form of the English language commonly heard in the HDB heartlands. Here, the spoken language is wedded to the stereotyping of roles and spaces – the mothers at home, the fathers at work. The poem might also be read as a critique about what is not said between the two women – the roles that these heartlanders as mothers, wives and women are obligated to take on, and how they are perceived within the HDB heartland. In the iconic 1960s archival *Berita Singapura* (Singapore News) series, black-and-white propaganda footage on Singaporean public housing captured domestic life as orderly and predictable. These early representations espoused the nuclear family as the heart of the heartland. Significantly too, the footages showed the housewife/mother as benefitting most from the HDB's growing list of amenities as women were filmed running their daily chores within the extended landscape of their housing estates, often with a child in tow. Similarly, the imaginations and worldviews of Yap's two mothers are controlled by what they see on television, and also by what their husbands decide – from the type of vitamin supplements fed to their children, to the selection of furniture and fittings for their flats. Their aspirations are for their sons excel in school, and their duty as mothers is to provide the scaffold for such academic success. We are not told who they are, what they do, what they desire for themselves. They are completely defined through their families.

This productive (biological and economical) heterosexual coupling retains its hold on the image of Singaporean public housing today. Even with changing demographic and family structures that include an increase in single parents, and more unmarried and alternative couples, this rubric of efficiency, productivity and functionality underpins a dominant patriarchal familial structure where women play well-defined roles as affective caregiver. Indeed, even for working mothers, their 'value' remains pegged to how the children perform in school, whether the family flat is presentable, or how emotionally stable the family can claim to be.<sup>57</sup> The archival architectural representations of family life reinforced a familial heterosexual normativity, and further entrenched women in their traditional roles at home, despite an island-wide modernizing urban programme and the International Style architectural aesthetics of the HDB flats, which were ideologically linked to liberated and modern ways of living.

Further, *2 mothers* is exceptional in that it offers, through the figure of the mother, a populist but also affective and critical perspective of HDB life. The Singlish conversation is immediately recognizable and for many local readers, it remains an endearing and comforting sound. Moreover, just as Singlish is spoken by the heartlanders who remain secondary to the cosmopolitan citizens, the poem gives visibility to women, who remain sequestered in their roles as mothers or wives within a domestic landscape that continues to reinforce conservative gendered divisions.

*2 mothers* discloses the burdens and biases that plague the HDB heartland. It brings together the voices of women, whom are rarely heard or represented, and allows the reader to contextualize their hidden thoughts against the politics and poetics of specific spaces – the flat, the playground, the city. As one mother remarks 'money's no problem. It's not that/ we want to save' adding casually that her husband has completely refurbished and refurbished their flat, the other ends the conversation with talk about the family's new car and a trip for her son out of the HDB heartland, 'come, cheong, quick go home & bathe./ ah pah wants to take you chya-hong in new motor-car'. At the playground, the potentialities of the two families are reimagined and recasted by the women, who are keen to connect their largely hermetic existence to the world at large. Even the city seems foreign to them, evoked secondhand through imported objects such as the sofa and the new car.

The conversation gestures towards how pervasive a regulated HDB existence might be, by articulating how collectively similar preoccupations of family life are carried from the privacy of a flat into the open expanse of a children's playground. In his characteristic minimalist style, Yap uses space and sound to suggest certain gender biases, domestic proclivities and conservative conceptualizations of 'home' within a HDB milieu. As the architectural theorist Naomi Stead argues about the value of literary input to architectural discourse, the poem offers us not just a view into life in a HDB estate but also how the architecture of the estate itself regulates life and purpose. The poem opens onto,

...an affective understanding of architecture – of buildings acting within the register of human emotions, whether loved and hated, feared or exalted, haunted by ghosts both friendly and malign. This is an understanding of architecture that stands outside the techno-rational framework of modernism, yet avoids some of the nostalgia and essentialism that attend the dominant alternative, metaphysical or mytho-poetic strand of architectural thought.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

I have attempted to trace how Singaporean literature critically enacts the abstract and impersonal architecture of public housing through a peripheral constellation of domestic objects, household practices and embodied occupancies. Such literature challenges the perception that occupants of public housing are consumers of their own households. The literature suggests a fractured perception of 'home'. These literary enactments also bring an acute awareness towards significant ephemeral configurations that take place between building and body, space and occupancy, ideology and desire. The ability to suggest, persuade and speculate demonstrates the power of, and equally, the difficulty with, literature. Literature is evocative but also slippery when set against the absolute certainties of architectural form. This contrast is particularly true in the case of Singaporean public housing, given that the architectural decisions are ultimately endorsed by the success of the housing programme. If so, how can literature enter into the architectural conversation, and why should literature matter at all to architecture? What is the relationship between literature and architecture such that literature is not merely an illustration of architecture, or a mirror of architecture's perceived 'reality'?

Early Singapore literature about public housing begins to offer, I suggest, an ekphrasistic reading of an architectural typology which has until recently been treated almost completely as a technocratic construct. Ekphrasis is a literary genre which articulates a relationship between poetic writing and the thing which it seeks to describe, for example, works of art, architecture, architectural ornaments, and sculpture. Ekphrasistic description attempts to give concreteness, stillness and substance to the thing laden with such textures, or as architectural theorist Sarah Treadwell writes, 'Language involved in ekphrasis is traditionally poetic and involves a testing of the limits of communication; operating on the edge, words become concrete or the tangible world dissolves into language.'<sup>59</sup> By 'ekphrasistic', I mean that literature compels ephemeral atmospheres, colours, textures, smells and emotions into the telling of a space, a technique which normative architectural discourse often suppresses in its exclusive focus on design. Rather than distinguish these texts as two unrelated genres, what happens when literary texts about HDB housing are read ekphrasistically as architectural texts?

By the end of the 1980s, all the HDB tenants were distributed free publications that taught them how to be modern city-dwellers. Tips included features of selected flats that were perceived as well-designed. The publications reminded homeowners that decorating



their flats using a non-approved contractor would result in hefty fines, and that keeping a cat in their home would incur the same result. It framed investments in domestic consumption as seamless with emotional attachment. The Singaporean poet-writer Tania de Rosario writes about the irony of these instructive publications:

*Our Home*, it was called. ... Not my home, not your home, and certainly not theirs. Remember, this is our home, and this is how you must act. Here are the things to cook. This is how you adapt. Here, look at the cover pictures. These are the sorts of families you should have. Look at these smiling children. Don't you want this? Don't you want this? Who doesn't want this? You must want this. We should want this.<sup>60</sup>

In *And the Walls come Crumbling Down* (2016), De Rozario's part memoir and part poetic piece, she traces three parallel journeys – the physical deterioration of the house she lives in, the emotional breakdown of a lesbian relationship told through the rooms she once shared with her partner, and a memory of her childhood spent with her grandmother living in a HDB block. De Rozario's writing performs a crossover between genres – the three stories are also architectural memoirs about how architecture can be perceived through their occupational histories. De Rozario frames each part of her life story through these houses. They construct her story and her memories. While the order and sense of propriety in a public housing estate is alluded to in de Rozario's biography, these are intricately entwined with how architecture influences, not only interior furnishings, but also behavioral patterns and modes of being. Writing about her childhood when she was raised by her Eurasian grandparents in their new dwelling 'in the sky', de Rozario muses how easy it was to put a foot wrong just by being herself:

Living on the top floor of a point block was the rage in those days; these new marvels that surpassed their twelve-storey sisters in height and eclipsed them in terms of privacy. We towered over the neighbourhood, watched over everything that fell between the basketball courts and the bank. Ang Mo Kio had been built up the year before I was born and prefab flats were valued for their novelty. It was clearly going to be a decade of prosperity. Almost two hundred and forty thousand flats had been built the decade before, and soon, the entire nation would be living in the sky. ...[B]y the time I was born, my father had gone. My mother, newly single and born again, loved her five-room flat. She furnished it with kitsch that ranged from trendy darkwood furniture to miniature clogs she'd bought in Holland. ... [A]nd then there was me. This racially ambiguous, single-parented, girl-child, screaming the height of twenty-five storeys to meet my mother's ears. My household was generally accommodating, because that was the only noise I made for the day. And once my mother had walked out of eyeline, and I was convinced that my voice could carry through twenty-five storeys of air, I kept mostly to myself.<sup>61</sup>

As she discovered her sexuality, de Rozario found herself moving away from the orderly public housing neighbourhoods into more tenuous housing arrangements. Forming a non-heteronormative family, she and her lover started 'house' with some housemates in an old walk-up flat. Unlike the restraint demanded of HDB living, this slightly derelict space accommodated their unorthodox sexual groupings and unconventional preferences:

It did not matter that nothing matched. That three glossy fortune gods looked upon formica working-spaces. That dirty wooden easels stood upon polished marble floors.

That retro furniture we had picked up from a void deck in Bedok, clashed terribly with the modern monstrosities that matched only each other. That the toilet constantly clogged. That the whole area lived with an underground roach problem so severe I once heard my housemate screaming from two blocks away, slamming the windows shut as hundreds of them climbed the exterior walls of the apartment, trying to get away from the fumigation downstairs.<sup>62</sup>

De Rosario's memoir of the HDB flat appears only once somewhere in the middle of her book but one might argue that it is against this flat from which all her other houses are perceived and figured. Underpinning the novel is her existential search for the meaning of 'family' and how this entity is housed, how it makes itself 'at home.' Indeed, the HDB flat of her grandparents became this proverbial space – both configured through her own increasingly alienated experiences, and through the State's manifest policy that those houses in the sky would accommodate thousands of happy, thriving families. Through evictions, moving, leaving and being left behind, de Rozario's is a literary text entangled with space, bodies and emotions. Still defined by its obsession with space, her writing is much more embodied and emboldened than the three other authors discussed earlier in this chapter. In the end, de Rozario cannot disengage from the very thing which she believes will set her free,

Walking out of my mother's house, I felt cowardly but was called brave. Neither of these is completely true. For the most part, what I was, was desperate. ... I did not need to be thrown out of the house to understand that I was being rejected. ... If I don't belong to my mother, to whom do I belong?<sup>63</sup>

Her novel articulates a sense of public housing through the occupants' failings – how they have deviated from the norm by being themselves, and how they subsequently need to create their own spaces to allow other subjectivities to thrive, particularly those operating outside the realms of the heteronormative family.<sup>64</sup> De Rozario's words give concreteness to a prejudice that is altogether ephemeral partly because it is repressed and denied in a nationalistic space where so many call home. Its criticality comes from being able to offer architectural discourse clues on where and how to look for these tell-tale modes of making, and unmaking, home.

## Acknowledgments

With thanks to Madam Goh Lay Kuan and the estate of Kuo Pao Kun for permission to reproduce excerpts from his poetry. Research for this paper was supported by the National University of Singapore's Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Seed Fund WBS R-295-000-131-646.

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