

Mother and Ah Girl Move House



It is the year 2017, and Dakota Crescent is in the process of an evacuation.

A single mother and her child remain, the final occupants of their block. The playground is a lot emptier than they are used to, and the future seems a lot murkier everyday. In the open spaces of the estate, foreign sounds fill the air. Bells ring and tentages spring up. An auction house is opening...

This is the story of the place Mother and Ah Girl grew up in, and their search for a new somewhere that they can call home again.

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Abstract

This thesis questions the process of transition between homes - a process that happens to occupants who are emptied out of established public housing estates. This is a transition that appears seamless, and almost as a mechanical process presently. Mass upheaval is a transition that has become the norm for the 82% of the population that lives in public housing estates - to live on leasehold and be made to uproot as and when. This thesis questions if this latent process of upheaval and removal can become an architectural generator of a more enduring connection to estates which are being erased and rebuilt.

The design proposal searches for an architecture that shifts in response to decisions that threaten the continuity of a community's ties to this domestic landscape. The process of the estate's transformation is staged to reflect an ongoing negotiation on this continuity. The momentum surrounding this negotiation is spatialised in a series of designs: interim programmes exploring the complexity of relocating households, and reflecting the exuberant pretences of localised initiative.

By anchoring the playground amidst a changing tabula rasa, the design establishes a conversation about community in the Singaporean heartland, and the expiration of architectural objects in our landscape. It weaves an imagination of a site that is no longer as it was, merging the qualities of a community centre, a conservation site, a space of resistance, and an extension of the home.

Consistency

What are the key design gestures, and how do they display a consistency in this thought process?

The proposal features a series of interim programmes. These function to facilitate the process of residents moving out of flats. Their interim nature is hinged upon that of the site's speculative future - will it be conserved, or will it be demolished? By arranging a family of temporary/ easy-to-assemble parts, what we have are a kit of parts that will allow the architecture to respond to house different programmes...programmes that respond to key decisions being made about the lives that revolve around this estate.

While these proposed programmes are responses applied to Dakota Crescent, I also see them as components that can be applied to other sites. The fact that there are other estates and numerous households dealing with a similar threat of upheaval makes this architecture all the more relevant today.

What do these gestures set out to achieve?

I see the architecture as a corollary to the Housing and Development Board's (H.D.B.) efforts to relocate households as smoothly as possible. I think it is great that the HDB and its media outlets concern themselves with successfully settling people into new homes. However, I do think that we should also be concerned with the process of moving *out*. The programmes I propose each work to assist in this relocation process in a very practical way. At the same time, they also articulate this idea of loss, of rupture, and of resistance to upheaval. Auction houses, wayfinding centres, counselling services... the architecture becomes exciting because it has to work towards communicating these themes through the functioning of such programmes over time.

How else may this existing situation inform our speculative future of these estates?

The element of time is very important in this scheme. A domestic landscape (and the objects within it) is made significant by the habits performed there. Children fight in the sandpit late in the afternoon after school. Working adults smell home-cooked dinners when they walk past it in the evening. Grandfathers stop by the candy store to give their grandchildren a secret candy treat.

Dealing with an established housing estate also means that different generations of a family have grown up here. Revisiting a childhood playground sometimes gives you this strange sense of scale and time... you would not jump off a slide as you did when you were young. Suddenly, the head of a “dragon” or the wings of a “dove” do not look as large as they were in your memory. These landscapes trigger our early encounters with architecture and space. In our memory of these encounters, space expands and contracts... time speeds up and slows down.

In our scramble to commodify and make kitsch objects we formed an attachment to (like the dove and dragon playgrounds), I believe that there is an underlying desire to *talk* about their expiration. To find space to question their lifespans.

Finally... what does this mean for the design inquiry?

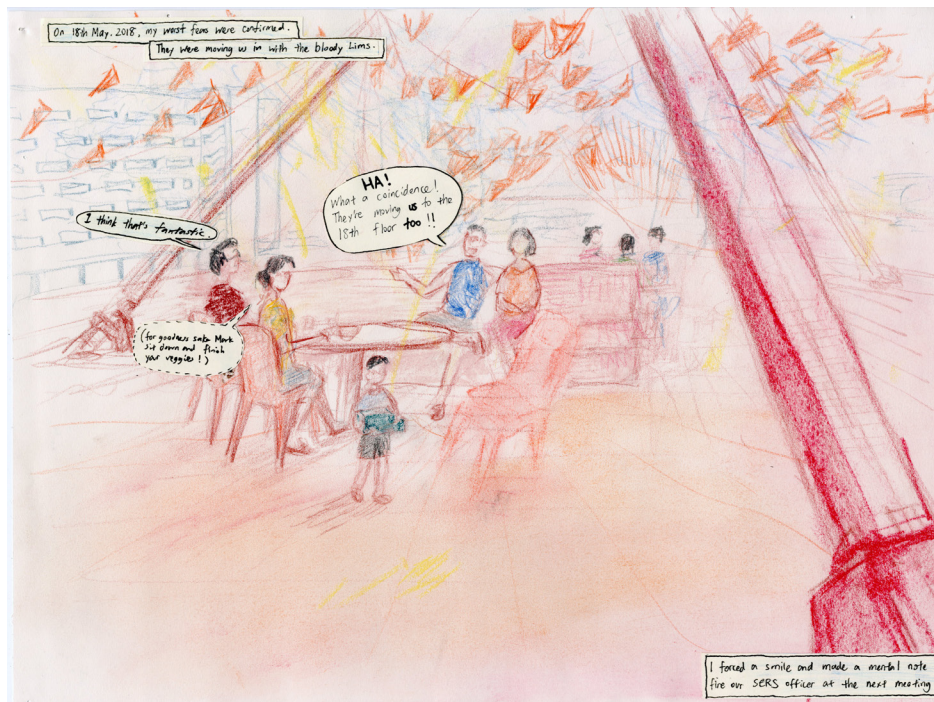
What this means for the design is that these components have to perform the same spatial *porosity* that existing elements in the domestic landscape already possess.

Throughout the process of this design inquiry, I developed a growing fascination for the small details that colour the everyday life in these landscapes: the weekly schedules of the karung-guni men, the benches that overflow with children leaving school, the quiet corners home to truants at midday. A domestic landscape is so fascinating because it is a space where people *expand their private boundaries*.

I learned that these habits are so markedly different to how everyday life in the HDB is typically depicted in its brochures and ads. There are tensions we do not see, tensions glossed over on images of politicians posing alongside our iconic playgrounds or markets.

These domestic spaces are political, and they are aligned to positions of power. Open spaces of the heartland are not neutral spaces, and occupancy of territory is a negotiation that plays out daily. The domestic landscape is teeming everyday with conflict and compromise, and it is very, very exciting.

Chapter One: Moving Day



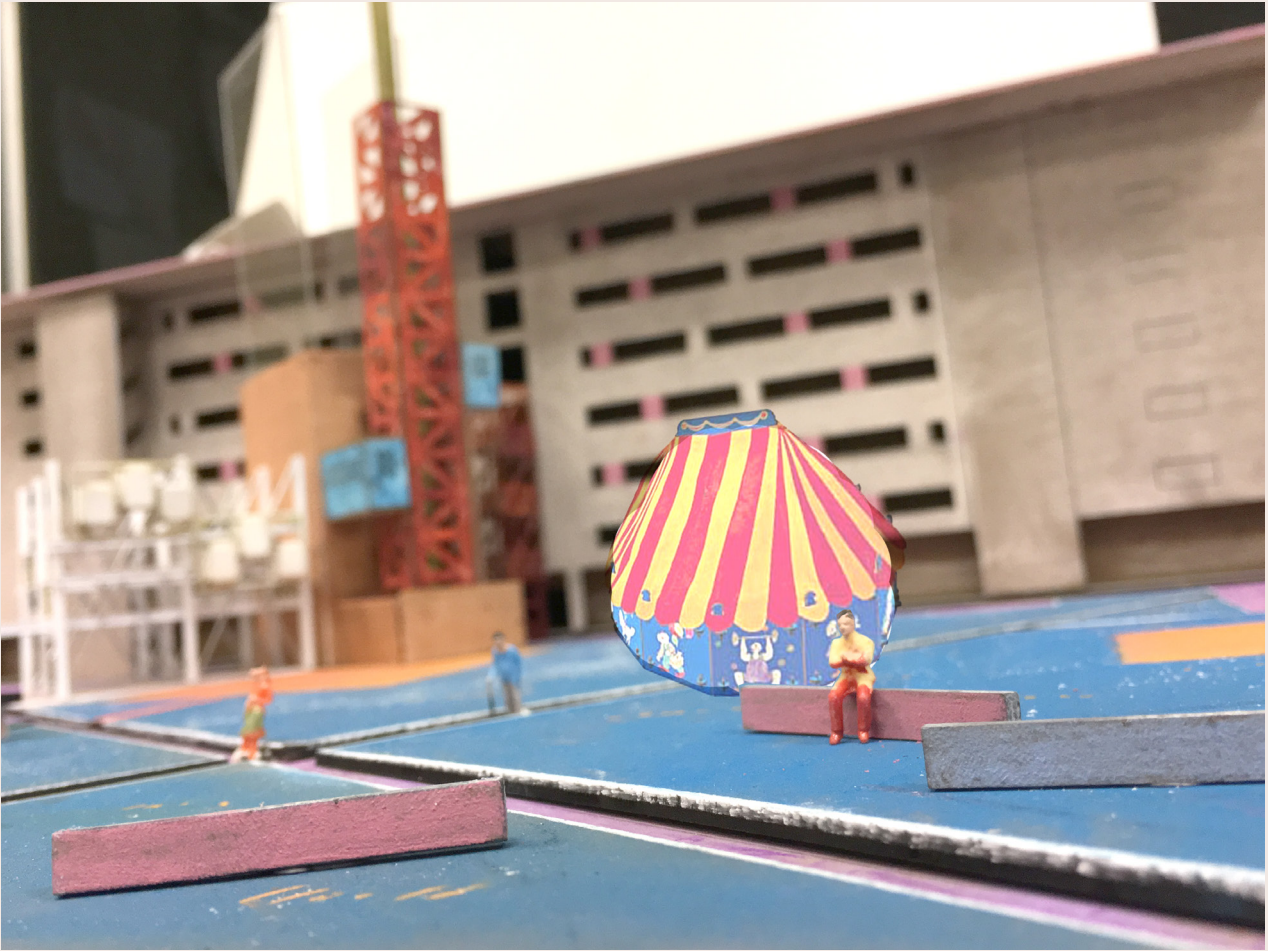
Mother always told ah girl not to sell to the Wednesday Karung-guni.

"Give to the Monday one, better. The others all chao-kuan one. Give them so many newspaper they only give back one dollar."

Ah girl pushed the stack of papers to the gate and poked her head out the corridor. Said selfish-and-greedy-wednesday-man and his ghastly horn were nowhere to be seen. She lifted the papers onto the new metal shelves that the kindly man from the HDB had installed this morning. The corridor was now lined with them - some pink, some blue. The quiet uncle at the end unit near the lifts had already moved half his (very significant) potted-plants collection onto them.

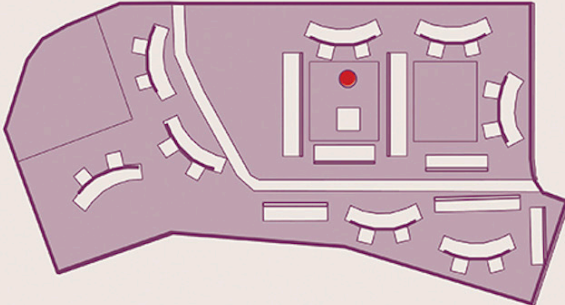
Ah girl liked those plants. Seeing them always reminded her of that book about the motehr hen gathering food to make a stew for all her farm animal friends.

The Component



1.1 The S.E.R.S. pavilion






1.1 The Pavilion

Purpose: H.D.B. consolidates its presence on-site with a mobile pavilion

Time of arrival: 01.11.2015

Dakota occupancy %: 85

Lifespan: 2 mths



What does it do that is different?

“Journey managers” from the Selective En-bloc Redevelopment Scheme (S.E.R.S.) are on hand to answer queries from residents. This presence aims to clarify the rather murky process of planning a relocation. The existing situation requires to-and-fro travelling as well as liaising with various agencies.

There are financial, socio-cultural, emotional and practical aspects of moving out that are manifest in these journeys and actions. By having a pavilion set up on-site, we have an opportunity to come up with mobile exhibition spaces and rotating exhibits over weekends. It is important for these functions to perform the role of journey managers, and of clarification.

When this pavilion has seen out its use here, it will move to another estate that needs it.



S.E.R.S. announcement made

Exhibition

Flat valuation

S.E.R.S. information & exhibition

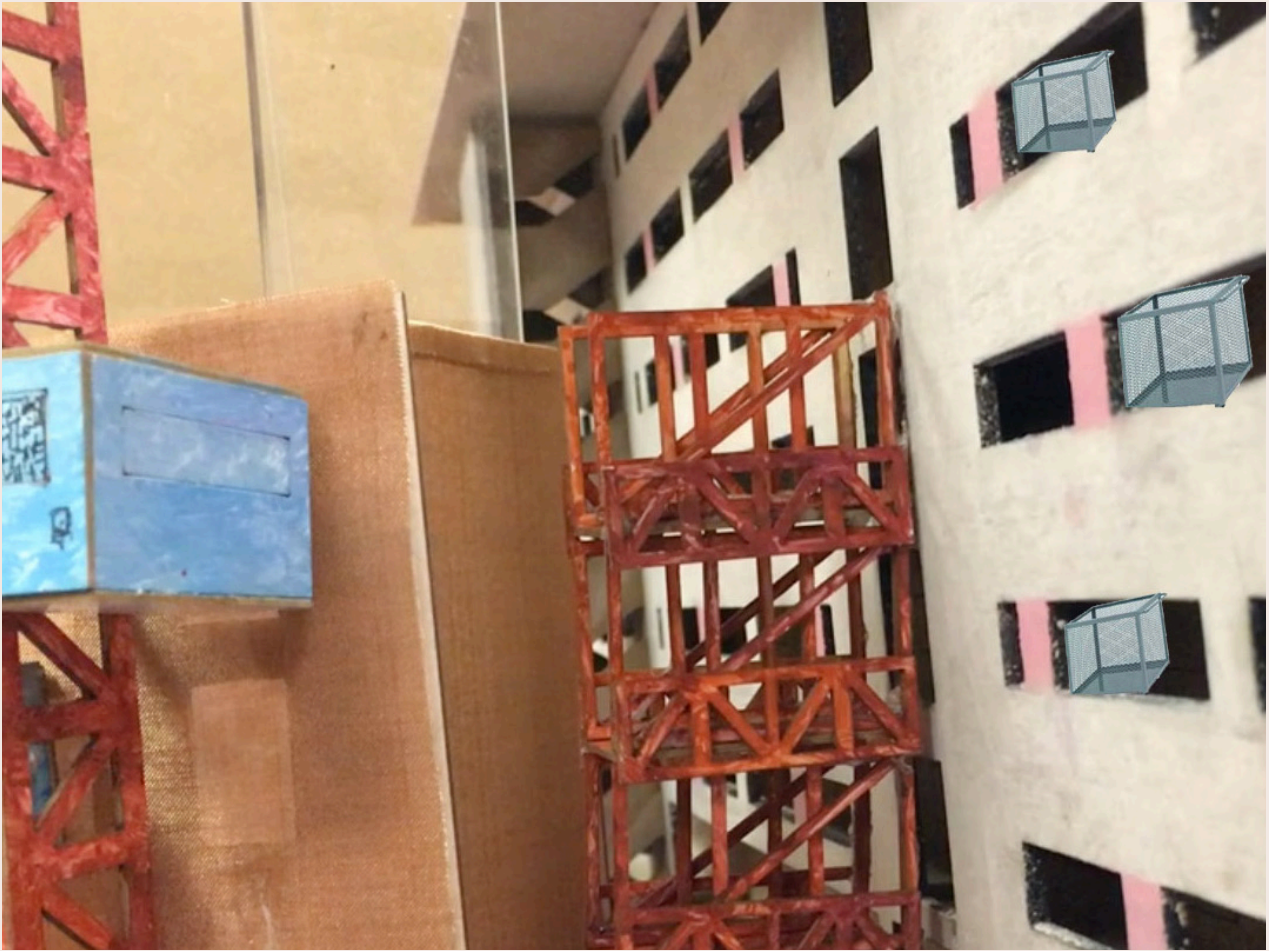
Catching up with old neighbours

650m
10-25mins

5-10mins

20-45mins

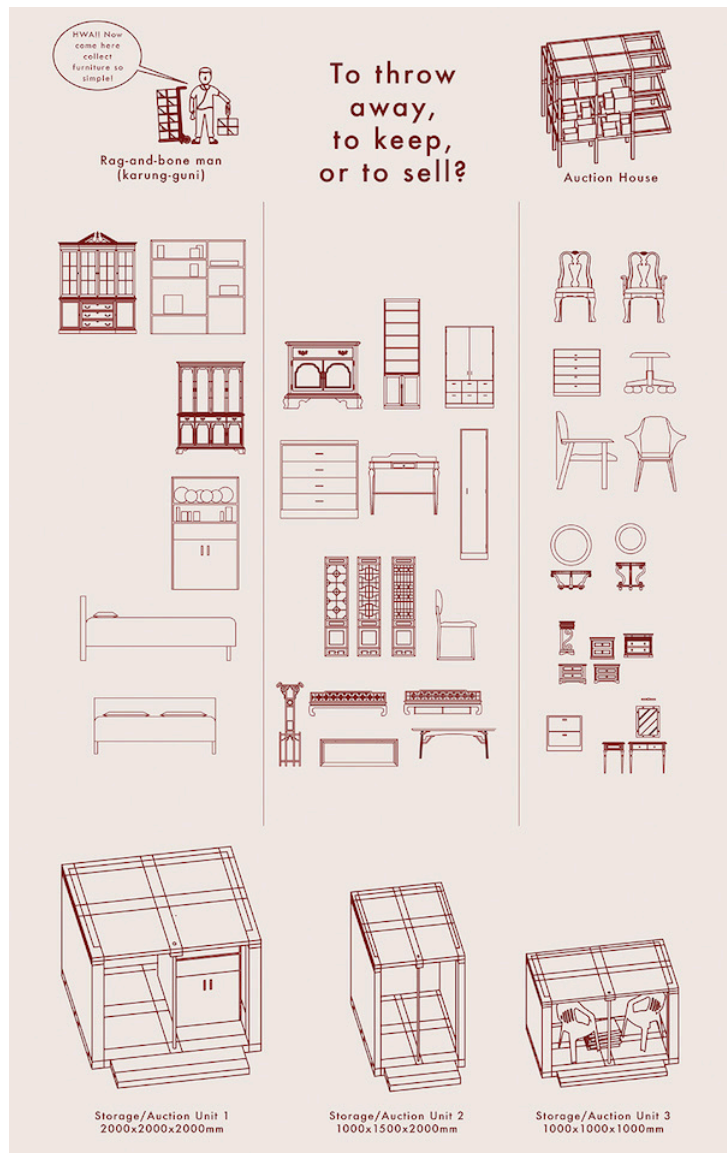
The Component



1.1 (a) The corridors



Negotiating the situation



What does it do that is different?

It is easy for the already narrow common corridors of a HDB block to become congested. Plants and various other personal items typically line these corridors. The proposal sees the HDB installing shelving units, one for each household. Residents may then place items on them to free up space for unpacking their households, and for neighbours to pass through. These units are lockable, and can be used to house items meant for short and long-term storage. Short-term storage may include items to be sold off to the karung-guni man.

Long-term storage would pertain more so to residents who wish to leave their old flat. Should they wish to move back in to the estate when newer flats are built, these storage units would come in especially handy in the months in between. Items that residents would like to auction off will be collected at an appropriate time. They may possibly find new owners in the same estate, or collectors and cafe owners eager to give these items a second lease of life. Items that will be left in storage (until their new homes are ready) will be consolidated at a central site elsewhere.

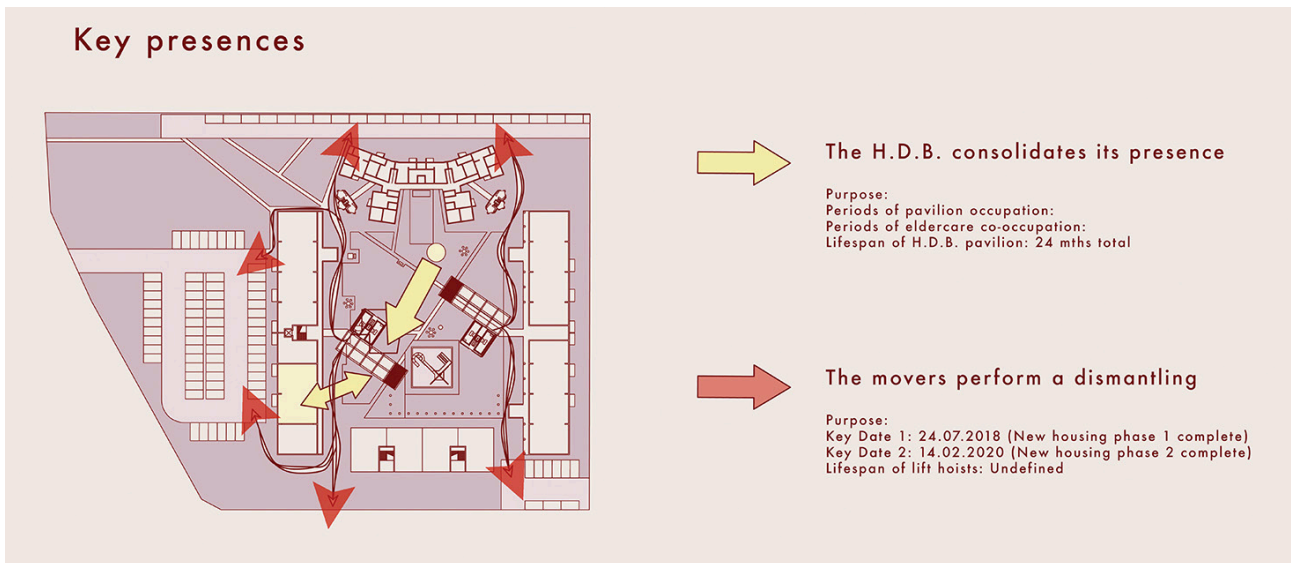
The Component



1.1 (a) The loading paths



Negotiating the situation



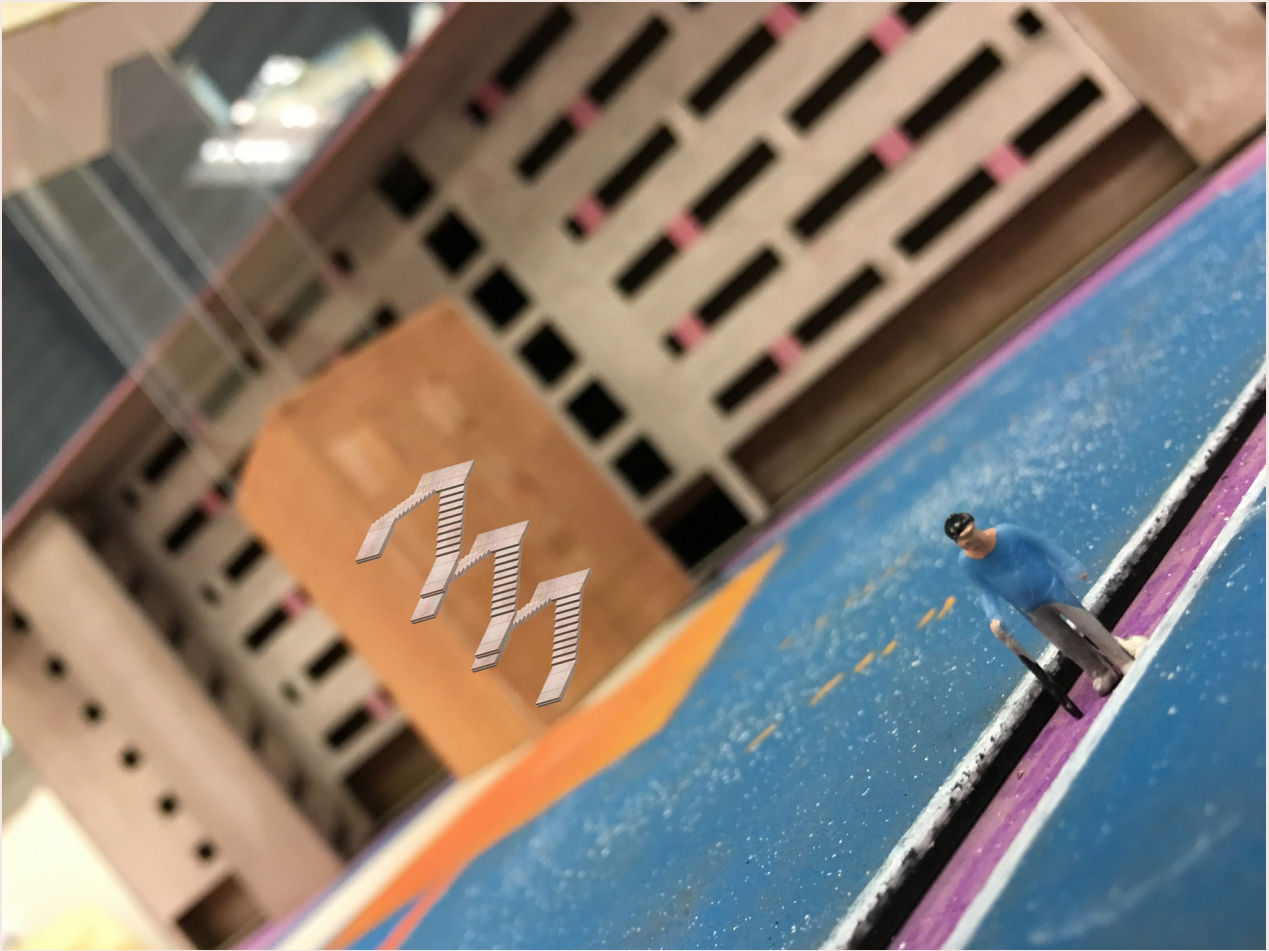
What does it do that is different?

The geometry of the design is hinged on the simple reasoning that existing pathways between blocks and loading bays should as much as possible be kept efficient. In the above cluster of flats, red arrows indicate where residents would typically move to get to the nearest carpark. This thus dictates where the movers' lifts would face.

As newer houses are being constructed around other parts of the estate, this central space will continue to act as a circulatory and wayfinding point, a consistency while the tabula rasa changes.

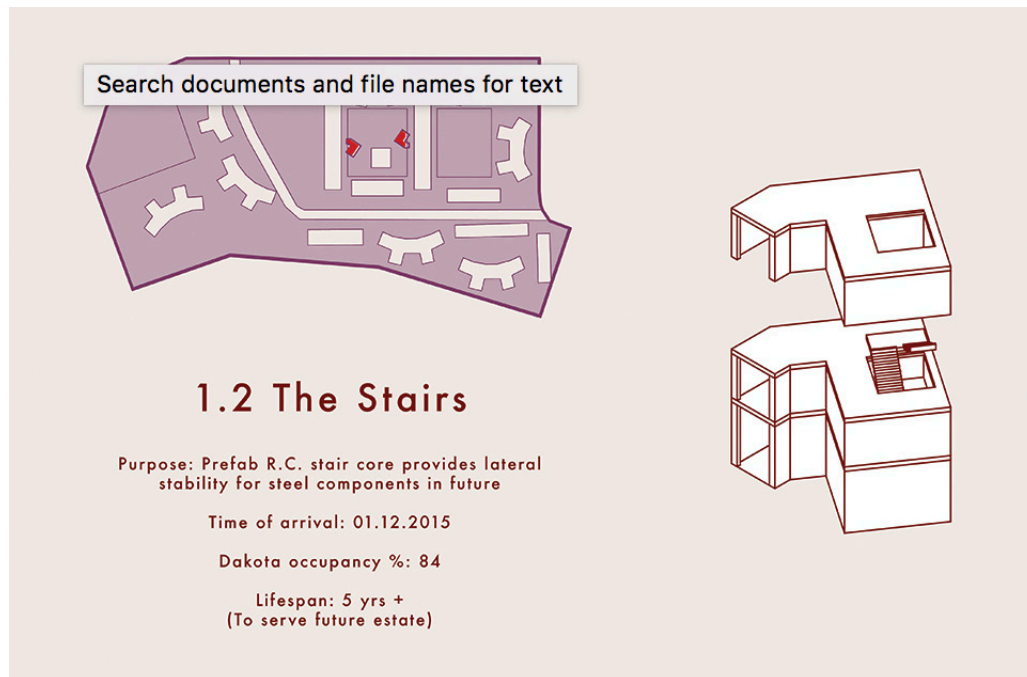
In future, once new homes are settled in, this landscape gives an opportunity for sensitive new elements to be added in. Paving patterns could feature overlapping geometry with newer materials. Benches and trees could be planted, or built around existing elements. The domestic landscapes of today are sites of such constant rearranging of amenities, and this open space here would eventually play host to such amenities, too.

The Component



1.2 The Stairs





What does it do that is different?

The thinking behind prefab circulatory cores is that they can be assembled quickly on the site, and with minimal fuss. At the same time, they provide a source of lateral stability and a symbolic fulcrum around which more temporary structures can be assembled in future. For example, steel tension cables will tie re-used Mild-steel grilles from around the estate back to the structure when these grilles are used for sun-shading. This happens in stage 2.3, the Recycling Point.

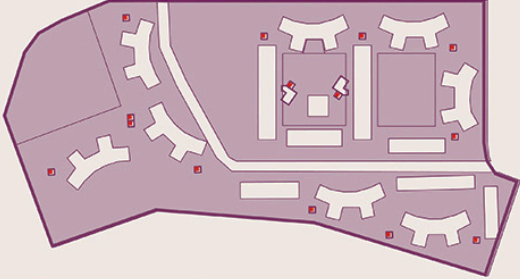
The Component



1.3 The movers' lifts



Negotiating the situation



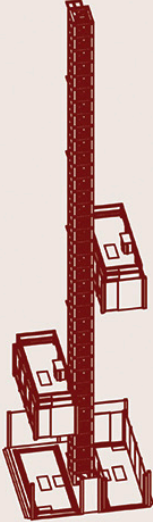
1.3 The Lifts

Purpose: Temporary lift hoists assist residents and movers. 2 tied to RC stair core, the others to old flats

Time of arrival: 01.01.2016

Dakota occupancy %: 83

Lifespan: 24 mths (majority)

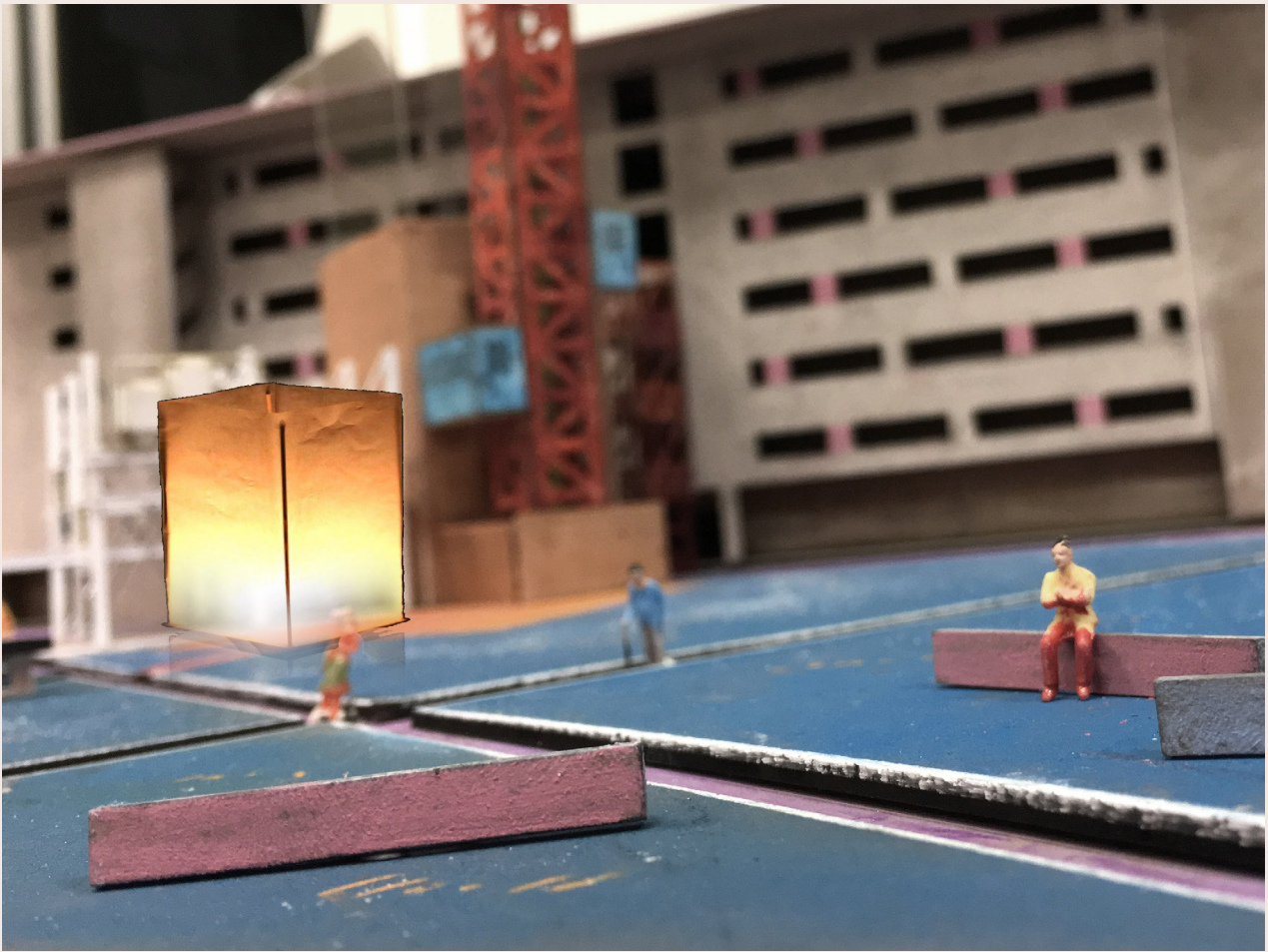


What does it do that is different?

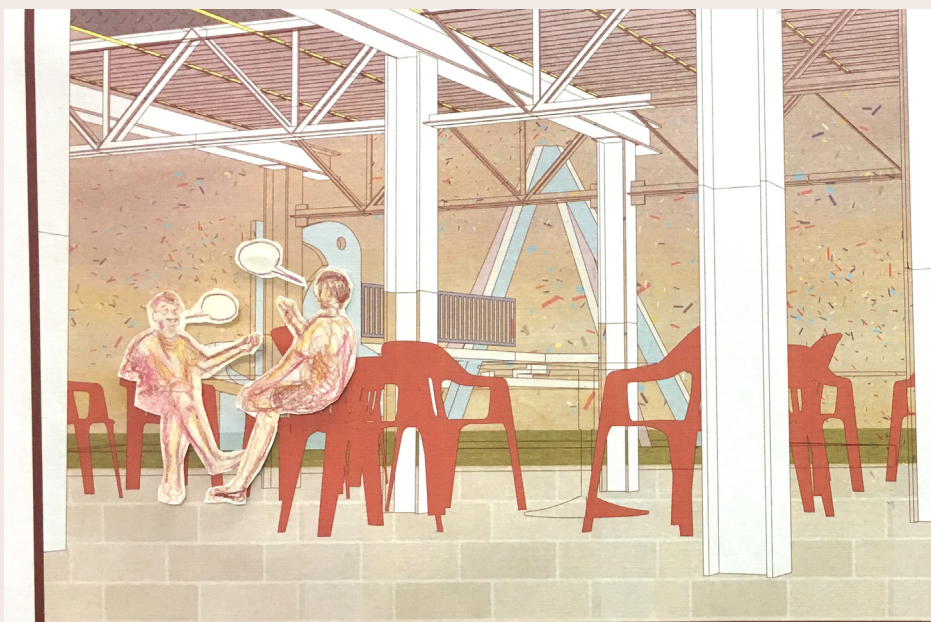
Lift models used here are Mcdelevators NOV-3242-dual carriages. Their cars' interior dimensions are 1500x4000, and their standard lifting speed is 1.17m/s. A major issue in this mature estate is that the lifts malfunction frequently, and this makes the process of moving additionally tedious. With these lift hoists, a quick and temporary solution will serve residents in the interim, while they are moving out of their flats. When they have seen out their use, or the blocks they serve are eventually demolished, they will be relocated to serve other estates. They also serve to introduce to the place a design language that visually references the processes of construction projects, but with relatable features to make the place feel homely. For example, steel grilles can be manufactured to resemble the concrete air ventilation blocks that decorated the estate.



The Component



1.4 The lost-and-found



Negotiating the situation



What does it do that is different?

The estate will be undergoing many changes at this point in time. Even if not all of them are visible, decisions have been made that will affect the lives of residents living here. This is a period of arranging for new homes, and the adjustments that come with relocating. Many elderly residents related troubles with translating letters from the HDB, as they cannot read them. Tung Ling eldercare centre functions as an existing one-stop help centre at the moment. Many residents are familiar with Roger, the manager of the centre. He helps remaining residents to make the various arrangements they need help with. His is a familiar face that they will miss, as the new homes at Cassia Crescent have an eldercare centre run by a different organisation.

A lost-and-found centre opens close to this eldercare. This is where the HDB's "journey managers", or Dakota Adventures volunteers, will perform in shifts to be of assistance to the residents.



Chapter Two: Between Two Homes



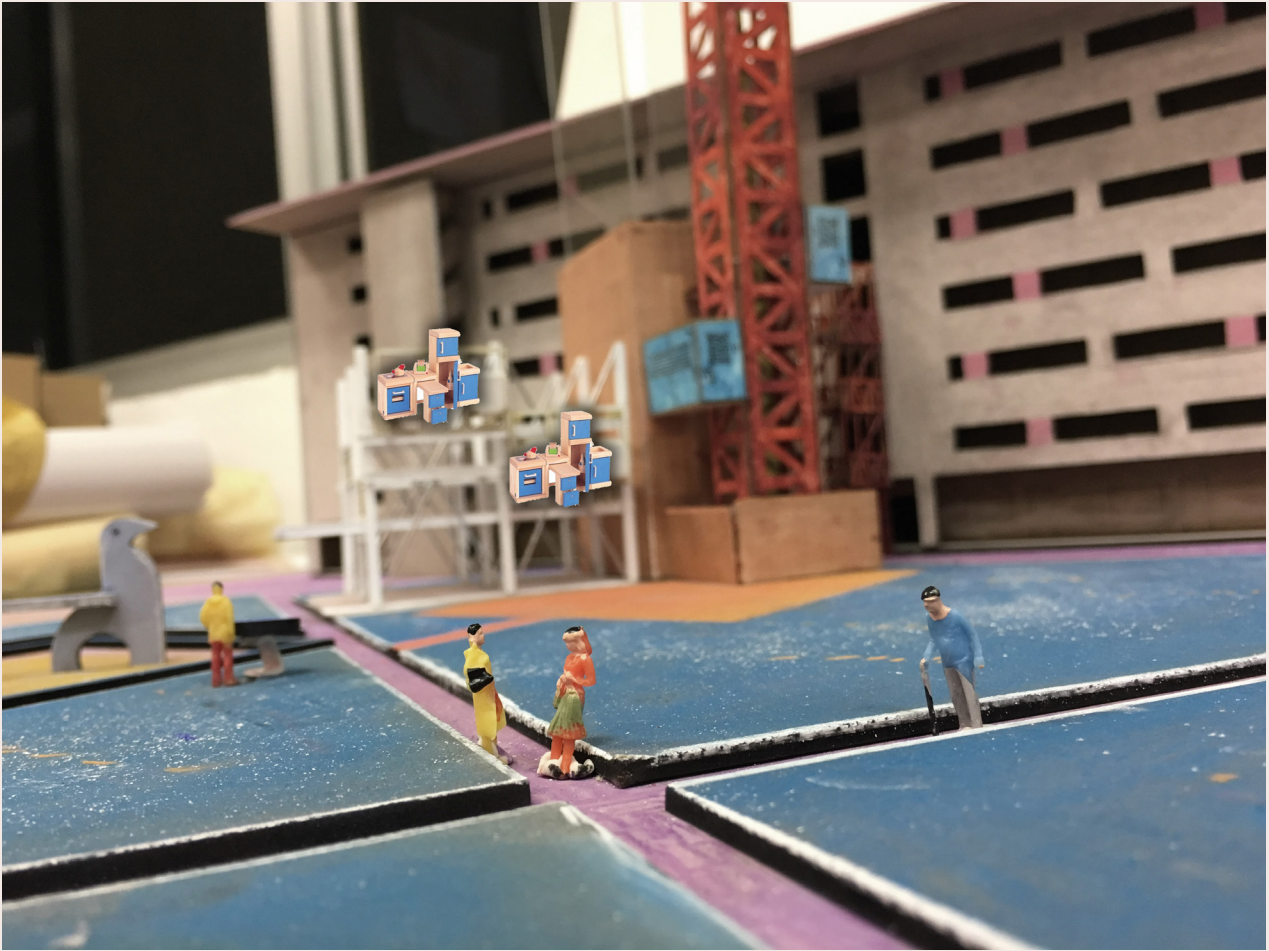
Ah girl is waiting at the playground for her brother.

She is almost twelve now, and Timmy is six. She takes bus 12 back from Katong every day and waits for Timmy so they can buy dinner from Old Airport Road (his favourite stall is ostensibly the Western one that's barely older than he is). Mommy and Daddy have been separated for three years now. They see Daddy every other Saturday, usually to go bowling because that's what Timmy loves.

Ah girl places her ribena hastily on a stone bench and sits down. She twirls her hair absently and hums. She's just received a message. It's the boy from that day at the mall, the cute one with the Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

A small smile lights up ah girl's face as she texts, and for the briefest of moments she forgets the sounds of children playing in the sandpit, the scent of mothers' cooking in the air. She thinks only of the comforting glow of a convenience store at night, and the delicate distance of a whisper.

The Component



2.1 The Auction House





2.1 The Auction House

Purpose: Residents sell unwanted furniture that may find a new home in one of the new flats

Time of arrival: 01.10.2017

Dakota occupancy %: 70

Lifespan: 2 mths

The image contains a purple floor plan on the left showing a building layout with a central area marked in red. On the right is a 3D wireframe of a multi-story steel structure with furniture items like chairs and tables placed on the levels. Below the images is the title '2.1 The Auction House' and a list of project details: Purpose, Time of arrival, Dakota occupancy %, and Lifespan.

What does it do that is different?

The pre-engineered steel structure that housed wayfinding services in the previous chapter will now be expanded to hold an auction house. Shelving units will be used as facade elements, with furniture visible from outside the building. The facade of the building thus reads as an open steel structure with furniture and other unwanted items hanging off of it. Visitors may take the lifts to various floors and browse the items. This auction house will perform in two-month cycles, including the time taken to erect and dismantle its necessary components. On the day of auctioning, a temporary tentage will be set up to house the numbers needed for the event. This steel structure will function primarily for storage until then.

The Component



2.2 The Candy Store





What does it do that is different?

This is the point in our narrative where new homes have been constructed on-site, and new residents are moving in. There is a mix of old and new residents who are getting used to the changing look of the estate. When population numbers increase with the added building density of newer flats, the open spaces of the old estate have to perform for more people too. This is where the HDB will lease out the premises of the former auction house on a short-term basis to interested vendors.


Once again, the facade treatment will be read to reflect the interim programme within. Instead of shelving units containing furniture, billboards and signboards can be hung from the steel structure. These will be visible, iconic signs in the landscape. The steel shed will house the convenience and comforts that these amenities need to offer to residents.

The Component



2.1 The recycling point





2.3 The Recycling Point

Purpose: M.S. grilles and railings from the old estate are consolidated here, to be reused as sun-shading devices in steel structures like these.

Time of arrival: 26.02.2018

Dakota occupancy %: 65

Lifespan: 2 mths

The image contains two main diagrams. On the left is a purple-tinted site plan showing a building footprint with a central courtyard area. On the right is a 3D wireframe model of a multi-story steel structure with several levels and columns. Below the wireframe are several small, white, rectangular blocks of varying sizes, representing the components of the structure.

What does it do that is different?

By the onset of Stage 2 Demolition, a total of 11 blocks will be demolished from the old estate. This leaves behind a lot of colourful mild-steel grilles with eye-catching colours and geometry from the balconies of the old flats. The idea is that these will be reappropriated as sunshading devices, so that the tectonic craft of this new steel structure can visually reference the material history of this estate. Symbolically, the new structure and core will hold up these old grilles, with tension cables cut exactly to their radius. This will perform a nice balance to the growing palette of new materials and colours in the landscape.

The Component



2.4 The tour





What does it do that is different?

At this point in the narrative, a final decision will have been announced on the remaining four blocks of the old estate (see above site plan). They might be conserved for re-use by arts groups as proposed in the existing Conservation Report being discussed in parliament. Or, they might have to make way, too, for the redevelopment figures to be met.

Dakota Adventures will perform a series of limited-edition tour runs. Residents from the old estate who are keen will return for a mini-funfair day. The space in front of an old butterfly-shaped block is activated as a gathering point, with a slight elevated incline to act as a stage.

This gesture is meant to reflect how this open space plays host to a variety of occupancy needs. In this closing chapter of the story, the landscape witnesses a tour itinerary that is very symbolic because we may very well be saying our final goodbyes to the estate. Tentages and chairs are set up, wooden platforms installed, small pop-up carts rolled in, and confetti fills the air. If we are to close the curtain on the remaining blocks of this old estate, it will be with celebrations befitting the optimism that has been engendered by the role of these interim programmes. It is an optimism that issues of conservation and retention can be discussed, and there can be a space for this discussion to play out over time.

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr Lilian Chee
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