

ARCHITECTURE + TECHNOLOGY/MEDIA

AR3222 HISTORY & THEORY OF WESTERN ARCHITECTURE

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Seminar 8

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Select an instance where the HDB and its related spaces are portrayed in local/international media and examine the relationships between the authorial intentions of this portrayal and its impact on how we understand public housing and its attendant spaces.

We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us¹

The Housing Development Board

Singapore, a city-state, resilient, adaptable, and able to overcome various challenges and to compete and to excel, is one of the most urbanized nations in the world. This unyielding spirit is reflected in public housing, in particular the Housing Development Board (HDB), since self-governance (1959).

In 1960, Singapore faced the challenge of overpopulation; housing and environmental problems were widespread with more than half the residents were housed in cubicles with inadequate sanitary conditions² the HDB was thus established. Since its inception it has resolved the housing shortage, by 1985 it had provided housing for more than 81 percent of the population of Singapore.

The HDB was conceived as a nation-building tool for the City-state, which was founded on pragmatism as an ideology³; The HDB and its public housing model are the built embodiment of this ideology. Marketed as a stake in nation building the HDB gave residents the chance to be homeowners – with 9 out of 10 owning homes⁴, a stake in the nation equating to belonging and an identity or association.

¹ Winston Churchill, House of Commons (Meeting in the House of Lords) 28 October 1943

² Chen, Peter S.J, "Public Housing and Urban Development in Singapore" *Journal of the Singapore Institute of Planners*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1976/77 Pg 59-77

³ Chua, B. H. "Not depoliticized but ideologically successful: The Public Housing programme in Singapore" *Understanding Singapore society* (Singapore: Times Academic Press 1997) pp 6 - 12

⁴ HDB Vision and Mission Video, *HDB website*, accessed on 1 October 2012

Selection of Media and object of study

This essay explores the portrayal of the HDB and related spaces within the short film *4:30* by Royston Tan, examining the relationship between the authorial intentions, through character development and plot, and the way we view public housing. The Essay explores the homogeneous nature of the HDB in film contrasting that with our preconceived ideas regarding HDB flats.



4:30 grapples with the loneliness and yearnings for interaction between a young boy, *Xiao Wu*, and his Korean tenant, *Jung*. The film's reflection of the monotony and alienation of the individual within the apparatus of modern public housing will be assumed to be its authorial intention. This essay will explore thematically, the societal implications of HDB living portrayed within the film and attempt to link it to our perception of the HDB from conception to its current context.

The HDB as the symbol of resentment

The HDB's vision of communal living, nation building and home ownership was initially received well after the housing crisis. The providence of home ownership has, in recent years, been marred with discontent from the constrained upper middle class unable to fulfill their dreams of upward mobility⁵. This longing for meaning and upward mobility has resulted in the HDB being associated with resentment and entrapment. The sentiments of loss of bygone kampong communal living are also the source of resentment.



In *4:30* Royston Tan explores these feelings of resentment and entrapment through the disgruntled *Jung*. Tan attempts to capture the quiet suffering of *Jung* through the emotions beneath the concrete façade he portrays.

⁵ Goh, Robbie, "Things to a Void" *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents and Interpretive Experiences* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2003) P. 64



The setting of the film at night and with a backdrop of dark colours and dark spaces using long shots instead of fast moving scenes creating the melancholy of flat living.



Tan portrays Jung as a character that has suffered lost love – emotionally wounded and quietly suffering, his negativity and resentment embodied in his attempts at suicide and masochistic tendencies.

The resentment of entrapment within the HDB is captured within *Playtime* with Tativille questioning the dominance of society defined by homogeneity and mass production and the portrayal of Tativille residents being completely seduced and lost within the automated modern city. The depiction laments the loss of uniqueness.



Instead of the warm encouragement of a better life and the fulfillment of the Singapore dream the HDB has entrapped the individual – it is the coffin marked with a melancholic anonymity of alienated isolated lives where their unfulfilled dreams are laid to die.



The Alienation of the lost Individual

The road networks and orderly grid like housing footprint based on the ideology of pragmatism is a characteristic of all HDB estates. The result of such pragmatic planning is spatial similarity of housing estates; Simplicity of form to suit function has been the goal at all times from conception to construction resulting in simple geometric shapes⁶, a sense of uniformity and loss of intimacy between individual and space is the consequence. On plan, as similarities between estates increase, unique features of the ground become less apparent and the ground having become abstract and less articulated results in “less incentive to find subtle nuances within the figure to stand out⁷”.



⁶ Loh, C.T. *Designed for Living: public housing architecture in Singapore* (Published by HDB Singapore 1985) p. 23

⁷ Dripps, Robin, “Groundwork” *Site Matters: Design Concepts Histories and Strategies* (New York, Routledge, 2005) p.77

The needs of mass housing have resulted in the use of prefabricated housing modules within most HDBs. As a result it is no surprise that the resultant Architecture, from plan to envelope is one of homogeneity and one of pragmatism. Similar to Tativille where viewers are immersed in architecture of presentation (to the masses), a globalized consumerist landscape which results in identical homogenous natures due to surveillance and adherence to culture norms and standards, the HDB is the symbol of the consumerist home owner who has bought in to an architecture of homogeneous spaces where individuality and uniqueness is lost and the individual alienated.



The homogeneity and uniformity is evident in Tativille evident in the grid of office cubicles where everyone is part of a collective workforce and no longer a unique individual. The modern office towers surveyed by Barbara in *Playtime* show no clues to the history and foundations in a world of cold emotionless surfaces of modern materials with only icons to identify and set them apart.



The similarity therefore destroys the sense of place. The familiarity that creates the sense of community is lost. The individual is thus lost in a homogeneous uniform landscape, similar spaces though named differently.



In 4:30 this alienation is explored through plot development, with *Xiao Wu* and *Jung* having no verbal interaction throughout the film. The isolation and alienation is evident in the setting, with the room as the primary setting and little interaction in the shared spaces of the house. Alienation is further explored through the introversion of spaces and the introversion of characters. This loneliness is epitomized when *Xiao Wu* attempts to discover intimacy spatially in the smaller unique confines of a canvas closet rather than the homogeneous HDB flat.

The film also explores the underlying reality that within the urban environment and within modern architecture, where tall HDB flats dominate the cityscape lies an inherent loneliness that a city dweller feels not only transcends cultural and geographic boundaries but also is inevitable.

The HDB is meaningless

The pragmatic approach in planning and land acquisition in search of recreating a state defined housing utopia has led to the destruction of the sense of place. There is a negation of historical vernacular stylistic particularities⁸. The resultant architecture is that of a homogeneous shell, dictated and regulated exteriors result in occupants searching for meaning and expression through the interiors of their homes and their occupancy. The traces of these flood the common spaces and are the basis for identity but also curiosity, inquisition and surveillance.



⁸ Goh, Robbie, "Things to a Void" Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents and Interpretive Experiences (Singapore: World Scientific, 2003) P. 69



In 4:30 the Spartan interior spaces have no ornamentation, nor detailing within the spaces. The intimacy and identity of the house as a home is embodied in activity and possession. With Identity comes curiosity – *Xiao Wu* 's inquisitive nature and the attempt to determine *Jung*'s identity by intrusion into his space, his bedroom, an attempt to know more and find intimacy in a surrounding where finish and detail connote nothing more than a meaninglessness and a bare mundane surface.



The HDB as an educational tool bringing conformity

The HDB's policies dictate lifestyle. They dictate the number of occupants permitted, and even the ideal way to decorate and furnish one's flat through *Our Home* their in-house publication⁹. The HDB dictates living through enforcing behavioral patterns, enforced layouts and home décor; this results in conformity to the perceived societal norm.



In 4:30 this educating conformity is juxtaposed with the uneducated childishness of *Xiao Wu*. What transpires within both the public and private realms within the film is beyond the HDB policies intentions of control and governance. *Xiao Wu* embodies a child-like rebellion and an exploration of freedom. His actions, beyond Jung's scrutiny reflect a notion of freedom and mischief beyond the reaches of the educating conformity the HDB seeks to enforce.



⁹ Kong, Perry & Yeoh, *Singapore: A developmental City State* p.6

In design the HDB and its common corridor create a Panopticon complex, where the notion of individualism is lost as users attempt to blend into the broader community, choosing to present a homogenous appearance in a community where the common corridor surveys and rewards conformity. With the loss of manifested individualism, unlike private housing where envelope structure and tectonics reflex the space and thus the user, the HDB uses its internal spaces to manifest its individuality in particular the individuality of the user. Like the Panopticon, the HDB common corridor and commons broader surveillance of the community.



The HDB and public spaces – surveillance and change.

The HDB's public spaces more often known as the Heartlands were created with the intention of shared belonging to a personal stake in the land with the intention that such terminology would create a motivation to seek one's roots and locate one's "heart"¹⁰. Yet the attempts to find one's roots and to recreate the familiarity required for a shared belonging are continually being disrupted and changed through the ever-frequent upgrading facelifts the HDB conducts.



As in 4:30 such public spaces where the Elderly perform morning exercises are the site for *Xiao Wu's* mischief but they also provide the young boy with a sense of familiarity and continuity. By the end of the film this space is destroyed, just as *Jung* leaves reflecting the continuous change upgrading brings but reemphasizing the alienation and loss of the individual, a destruction of familiarity and place in the pursuit of first world housing

¹⁰ Teo Yee Chin "Transforming the Heartland – Changing Appearances and Functions" *Singapore Architect* v227 (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 2005) p.84



The HDB's common spaces such as its lifts and common corridors form realms of surveillance. In its homogeneous environment where all things are dictated mundane and similar, surveillance and counter surveillance becomes the primary interaction and the only form of intimacy between residents and neighbours. These acts of surveillance are evident in *4:30* where *Xiao Wu* sneaks into *Jung's* bedroom at 4:30 every morning to spy on him and in the process attempts to discover more about his neighbour through short stints of surveillance.





With surveillance of the common spaces comes the need to express and exhibit one's individuality in the sea of conformity. The fluid boundaries of the HDB flat allow occupancy to spill into these common spaces. These interruptions of the public/private spatial demarcation manifest themselves in the form of footwear along the common corridor and laundry. This visible exhibition of occupancy gives rise to the paradoxical nature of public housing, where the anonymity bears traces of the idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants¹¹. Similarly in *Playtime* the fluid boundaries and transparency of Tativille creates information exhibitionism.



¹¹ Gulsam Baydar Nalbantoglu "Thresholds of Privacy and the Ideal(ized) Home", *Singapore Architect, Special Issue on Housing, No. 189* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1995), pp. 26-31.

The notion of surveillance as a deterrent to mischief and crime in the HDB estates is also explored in *4:30* where the internal spaces that are shielded from the surveillance of the public are the primary stage of mischief for *Xiao Wu*.



Surveillance brings familiarity and with familiarity a sense of endearment and intimacy. In *4:30* at key moments in the film *Xiao Wu* surveys *Jung* from a louvered window. Eventually when *Jung* leaves, and as the film concludes, *Xiao Wu* is left alone painting the glass louvers of that same window black. The scene reflects a critique of surveillance familiarity and the hurt of loneliness.



A Comparison of 4:30 and the HDB

Dichotomies in character portrayal are evident in Tati's *Playtime* and Tan's *4:30* both *Hulot* and *Xiao Wu* embody the quest for individuality amidst a city of flux; through *Hulot's* diagonal movements contrasting the citizen's uniform linearity, and *Xiao Wu's* mischief and intrusion, a yearning for communal intimacy, contrasted with the disgruntled and jaded *Jung* who is searching for a life of meaning likened to the entrapped resident. Both *Hulot* and *Xiao Wu* embody everything modern society has tried to leave behind.

Further positional and perspective dichotomies can be identified when contrasting the salient themes of *4:30* with the HDB's vision. The film questions the success of high density housing by exploring the loss of identity, individuality and alienation. It questions the possibility of privacy in a surveillance culture.



Privacy and surveillance are explored in 4:30. The home, a near sacred space, realm of security, familiarity, intimacy and privacy, a space to which occupant “goes back to”¹² is constantly intruded upon by *Xiao Wu’s* shenanigans. The boundaries between dichotomies constructed on fear and reassurance such as exterior/interior, public/private, and outside/inside are blurred. The flat unlike the walled bungalow is an extension and continuation of the city¹³, the notion of home as a refuge is thus lost as the city and its surveying nature invades the house.



¹² Gulsam Baydar Nalbantoglu "Thresholds of Privacy and the Ideal(ized) Home", *Singapore Architect, Special Issue on Housing, No. 189* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1995), pp. 26-31.

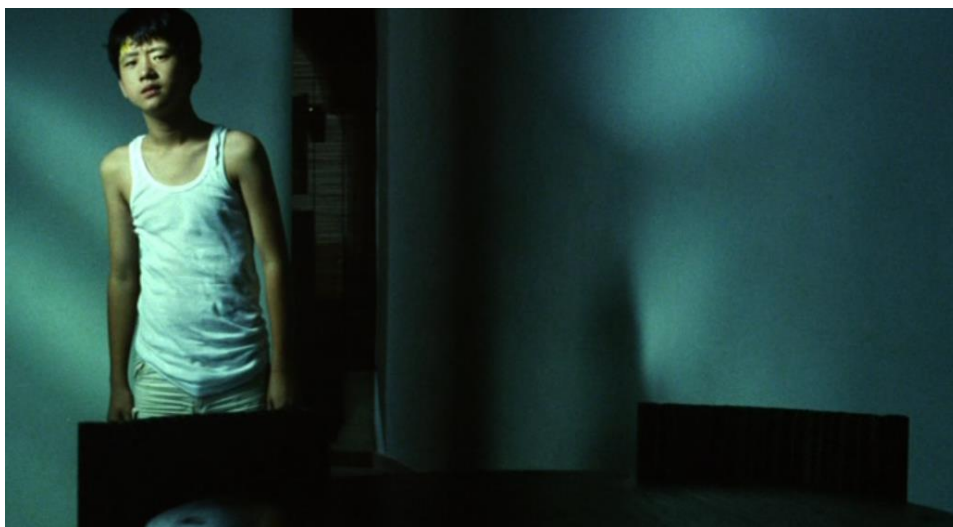
¹³ Lee Kip lin, *The Singapore House and Residential 1819 -1942* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1989) p.34

Internal spaces of flat living

Privacy as defined by Mark Wrigley is the cleansing of the body with architecture established as purification¹⁴. Architecture becomes the boundaries and edge to which one crosses with varying thresholds to achieve privacy. The natures of spaces within the flat are the thresholds; with different levels of privacy accorded to different spaces. By contrasting *4:30* to the local sitcom, *Police and Thief* the spatial characteristics (or lack of in the case of *4:30I*) of flat living become evident.



The living room in *Police and Thief* unlike *4:30* is the entry threshold, surveying and monitoring the house. Within it relationships are consolidated and tensions resolved. In *4:30* the living room is a void, a commentary on the emotional emptiness of the alienated individual.



¹⁴ Wrigley, Mark "Untitled: The Housing of Gender" *Sexuality and Space* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993) p. 344



The bathroom and bedroom are sacred spaces, spheres of cleansing, sleeping and sexuality – private bodily spaces of utmost privacy and security. The Bedroom, the most private of space, is constantly intruded upon by *Xiao Wu* at 4:30 each morning. *Jung's* belongings are stolen and his hair cut in his sleep. The bedroom however remains the most intimate space, where *Xiao Wu* cries due to loneliness and keeps his collection of *Jung's* belongings and data he has acquired from surveillance and watching *Jung*. The bathroom is likewise intruded upon by *Jung* as *Xiao Wu* bathes and similarly and in revenge by *Xiao Wu* as *Jung* bathes.



HDB Privacy and the sense of Community

The breakdown of spatial-boundaries is required for intimacy and the sense of community. *Xiao Wu* through his intrusions into *Jung's* space forges a sense of familiarity and grows closer to *Jung*, his fondness and their friendship is shown through a cup of orange juice which *Xiao Wu* prepares daily for *Jung*.



The need for community is paramount in high-density housing. A kampong familiarity based on social behavior and visual familiarity must be forged¹⁵. Corridors and spaces cannot be separate individualized ribbons but must overlap and become a focal point of sharing breaking down spatial and interpersonal boundaries¹⁶. The HDB though alienating and homogeneous provides opportunity for interaction in its attendant common spaces; its architecture – monotonous and stable creates these opportunities and familiarity¹⁷. Similarly in Tataville the final scene of *Playtime*, the Royal Garden shows the citizens interacting as their linear patterns breakdown into chaos.

¹⁵ Chua Beng Huat, "Practicable Concept of Community in High-rise, High Density Housing Environment" *Singapore Architect, Special Issue on Housing, No. 189* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1995), pp. 14.

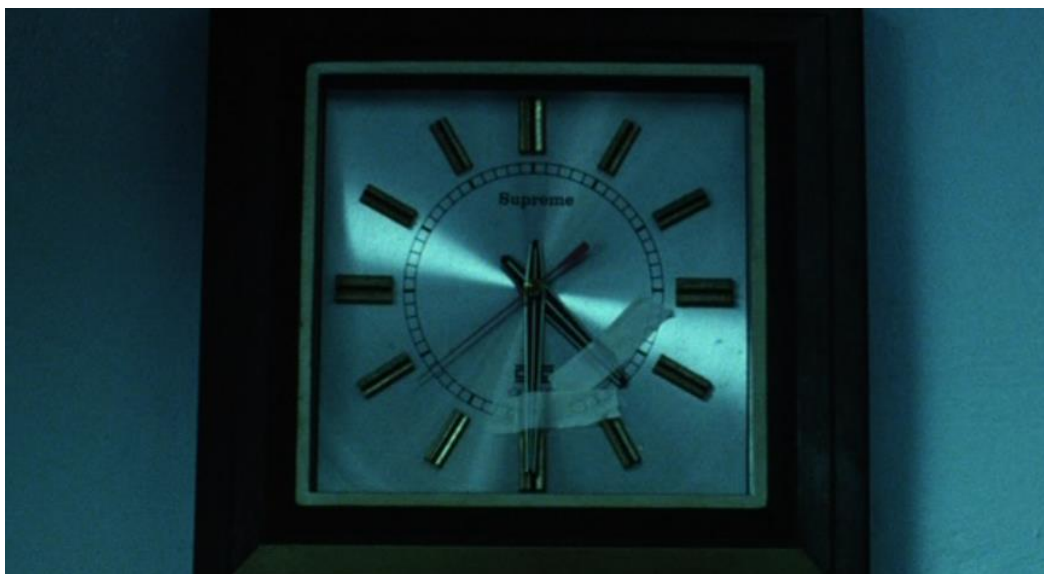
¹⁶ Chua, "Practicable Concept of Community in High-rise, High Density Housing Environment" pp. 17.

¹⁷ Chua, "Practicable Concept of Community in High-rise, High Density Housing Environment" pp. 16

Conclusion



4:30 illustrates HDB spaces as a reflection of the loneliness within the urban environment. The conformity and the loss of identity despite the close cluster nature of the HDB creates inward looking introversions, which result in a melancholic loneliness explored through the solitude of *Jung* and *Xiao Wu* in space and *Xiao Wu's* attempts to preserve the minimum interaction with *Jung*. This is in stark contrast to the HDB's vision of communal living.





It is thus vital that HDB architecture create opportunities for interactive familiarity without devaluing privacy and destroying the character and sense of place before occupants are desensitized and jaded, succumb to the grim reality of a lonely entrapped life within the monotony of flat living.

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