



Housing and Domesticity

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Architecture is always in the middle of something.

Figure 1

In the architectural essay film *03-FLATS* (2014), we find public housing caught in a domestic milieu of gendered bodies marked by age, sexuality, ethnicity and class. Conceptualized by Chee and made in collaboration with Singapore filmmaker Lei Yuan Bin, the film is an affective domestic portrait and counter representation of Singaporean public housing which follows the routines of three single women living in flats across the suburbs of Eunos, Queenstown and Sembawang.¹ As single owner-occupants, these women represent a growing segment of the population occupying national infrastructure built and allotted according to policies that are outwardly pro-heteronormative family.² Singles may purchase smaller one-bedroom subsidized public housing flats in non-matured estates or resale flats from the open market only upon reaching the age of thirty-five years, coincidentally also the threshold age of diminishing female fertility.³ Here, the body politic is tightly enmeshed with housing provision.⁴

Domesticity is taken as the film's subject not so much because it is contained in the architecture of public housing but because domesticity gives presence to this architecture. In other words, *03-FLATS* makes visible how public housing takes form, what it includes, what it does not and how occupation produces its own



Figure 1
Film still from *03-FLATS*
(2014), title card. Yuan Bin
Lei and Lilian Chee.



Figure 2
Film still from *03-FLATS*
(2014), inside the
Sembawang flat. Yuan Bin
Lei and Lilian Chee.

spaces engaging with, and sometimes, challenging, housing infrastructure and ideology. The architecture of public housing is portrayed not as anterior to occupation, but as a consequence of, and being continuously formed and re-formed through, domesticity.

Figure 2

An open window looks toward the sea in the far distance. The sky is dark; a storm is brewing. The papers on the whiteboard flutter as a strong gust of wind enters. On the wall behind the table, there is a big rectangular frame marked out with masking tape. The edges of the tape are blackened. In this crowded room, a young woman stretches out a piece of canvas covering almost half the floor. Later on, we see this same woman doing housework. She boils water, she prepares food, she washes her toilet. Domestic space is interiorized, processual and bodily.

Domesticity is as much a part of the city as it is persistently defined and kept apart from it. As architectural historian and theorist Gülsüm Baydar compellingly argues, domesticity stirs up contested subjects, including women's roles in households, institutionalized familial structures and status quo gendered expectations, which might not just destabilize conceptual boundaries of home and housing, but ostensibly also question architecture's disciplinary biases.⁵

Domesticity jams open the infrastructural space of housing with desires, tactics and spontaneity. It speculates, invents and makes do. Its esthetic forms are micropolitical performances not in the sense of its scale, but in how micropolitics operates creatively from within an already existing situation.

Domesticity is sensed most distinctly as affective, in its passing routines and traces. It facilitates connections, transitions and co-presence. Domesticity is affective because it derives its momentum and reasoning from being in the in-between, neither an object nor a subject but both: “[I]t is clear that ... affective thinking-feeling is not the thinking or feeling of a particular object – or a particular subject. It pertains more directly to the event, what passes in-between objects and subjects.”⁶

Lilian Chee is Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, where she co-leads the Research by Design Cluster. Her research connects embodied experience and affective evidence with architectural representation and feminist politics. Her award-winning film collaboration *03-FLATS* (2014) has screened in 16 major cities. She is on the editorial boards of *Architectural Theory Review*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, the *idea* journal and advisor for the Bloomsbury Architecture Library. Her current book projects are *Architecture and Affect* (Routledge, 2023) and *Remote Practices: Architecture at a Distance* (Lund Humphries, 2022). She co-directed a documentary *Objects for Thriving* (2022) which connects objects, domestic spaces, structures of feeling and the elderly. She was Visiting Fellow at Future Cities Lab Singapore-ETH Centre (2018) and Honorary Senior

Research Associate at the Bartlett UCL (2018–2019). Her current research explores the intersection of home-based work practices with domesticity through an affective-feminist perspective.

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Notes

1. Yuan Bin Lei and Lilian Chee, *03-FL3ATS* (Singapore: National University of Singapore and 13 Little Pictures, 2014); Lilian Chee, "03-FLATS: Domesticity, Home and Its Representations", 03-FLATS Research Project, 2014, <http://www.03-flats.com/>; Lilian Chee, "Reimagining Domesticity in 03-FLATS: Entering Singaporean Domestic Space through the Essay Film," in *Making Visible: Architecture Filmmaking*, eds. Hugh Campbell and Igea Troiani (London: Intellect Books, 2018), 117–137.
2. Natalie Oswin, "The Modern Model Family at Home in Singapore: A Queer Geography," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 2 (1 April 2010): 256–268. doi:[10.1111/j.1475-5661.2009.00379.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2009.00379.x).
3. Non-matured estates are less than twenty years old. Typically, such estates are less developed and less equipped with amenities and public transport infrastructure.
4. Lilian Chee, "Unhousing Sexuality: Sexuality and Singlehood in Singapore's Public Housing," in *Sexuality and Gender at Home: Experience, Politics, Transgression*, eds. Brent Carnell, Rachael M. Scicluna, Barbara Penner, and Ben Campkin (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 35–50.
5. Gülsüm Baydar, "Spectral Returns of Domesticity," *Environment and Planning D, Society and Space* 21, no. 1 (2003): 30.
6. Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 94. See also: Lilian Chee, *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

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