

**AR2222 HISTORY AND THEORY OF WESTERN ARCHITECTURE**



**The Dwelling's Interior in Chronicling Domestic Struggles: A Comparison Between its Representation  
in Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* and HDB's *The Promise* Series**

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## **Introduction**

Benedict Anderson's concept of an 'imagined political community' illustrates the potentiality of using media to construct a politicized idea of 'nation' (Anderson 1991, 6-7). In Singapore, public housing remain an immensely politicized subject, positioned to construct and perpetuate the 'ideal'. The modernist face of HDB blocks have been frequently publicized and archived for multidisciplinary discourse, while a comprehensive understanding of the interior - that potentially celebrates subjectivity, individuality and expression - remains elusive in the national narrative. On the other hand, the richness and multifacetedness of the domestic interior are being employed in local films. A paradigm shift in the understanding of the domestic interior is necessary to continually remain critical of normative representation and celebrate one's distinctiveness and identity apart from a politicized construct.

Therefore, this essay uncovers the singular modernist ideal of the domestic interior in HDB's *The Promise* (2014-15) series, and contravenes it with an analysis of Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013), focusing on its methodical and expressive domestic spatial narrative. Despite the involvement of domestic struggles in both plots, this study highlights *Ilo Ilo*'s creative use of the domestic space to portray conflicts and distress faced in a family while *the Promise*'s persistent presentation of the interior remain standardized and furtive in engaging its narrative. The subsequent sections will first touch on an understanding of the domestic interior before delving into the portrayal of the living spaces in *The Promise* series as representative of a national anecdote, and *Ilo Ilo*'s engagement and appreciation of rich domestic spaces to support its narrative.

## **Domestic Interior**

From the early eighteenth century, the 'interior' was ascribed intrinsic character and portrays individuality and subjectivity with ornamentation and domestic rituals. The start of the nineteenth century then saw an expansion in the meaning of 'interior', which came to embody the inner workings of a building or room that has been represented artistically, referring to the use of the term in media and theatrical sets (Rice 2007, 2). The increasing representation and exploration of the interior and living and its collision with modernity culminated in the writings of Walter Benjamin, who in *The Arcades Project*, expressed the ornamented 19th-century domestic interiors as spaces offering solace from the external industrialized urban fabric (Benjamin 1999, 226). Not only did the consumption of goods within the industrialized city offer individual expression within one's home, it permits the construction of the interior as a set that internalized and fabricated iconic, historical, utopian scenes

(Benjamin 1999, 9). However, High modernism, in exemplifying Le Corbusier's vision of transparent and open architecture, posits individual expression within the interior as secondary. Le Corbusier openly condoned adornment, while asserting the whitewashing of architecture and the aesthetics of mass-production and pure function as the future. The domestic interior was infiltrated and whitewashed to perpetuate ideals and principles of modernism (Chapman 1999, 44-58).

Faced with imminent issues of housing and social infrastructure, the HDB statutory board promptly embraced the modernist high-rise living as its primary model in housing provision, and has since prided itself on the achievement of high-standard living for its citizens. In the context of Singapore, the modernist visions did not seem to have completely ousted existing traditions and culture in both architecture and the interior, but was persistently negotiated and adapted through the lenses of the state and nostalgia of culture (Jacobs and Cairns 2007, 572-595). However, while the externality of these modern blocks have been excessively celebrated through media and archival documentation, the domestic interior that evokes celebration and remembrance of individuality, expression and independence of thought has been significantly downplayed (Chee 2013, 202).

### **The Promise Series: The Conception of 'Home' as Detached from the Domestic Interior**

The year 2014 marked 50 years since the implementation of the HDB's Home Ownership for the People scheme, hence the statutory board commissioned a short film *The Promise* (Sim and Tong 2015). Designated as a statement of HDB's efficacy in housing provision, the fictional film briefly captured the family struggles of an elderly couple and their subsequent generations. With its positive reception, its sequel *The Promise II* was commissioned and released in 2015 and focuses on the family tiding through struggles together across generations.

The film series culminates in a singular focus. It expresses not simply just the idea that a 'home' transcends the physical dimension, and is founded on the family's values and relationship - the series chimes in on the readiness and efficacy of HDB's help in building a resilient nuclear family. Furthermore, an analysis of the series evaluating how key domestic struggles are illuminated suggests a notable downplay of the importance of the interaction between the domestic interior and occupants in formulating the perception of a 'home'. I suggest the films express the concepts of liability and spatial constraints faced by the family through sole emphasis on dialogue and human sentiments, remaining detached from a thorough exploration and expression of the domestic interior.

### **Liabilities: A Series of Dialogue and Sentiments**

After the elderly suffered a stroke and was confined to the wheelchair, *The Promise II* conveys his disappointment with his condition and as a liability to the son's family mainly through a series of dialogue and events. Despite crucial moments where he expressed his weaknesses and disappointment, the film allowed these events to occur with little relation to the untapped potentials of domestic space. Events where he was unable to control bodily functions as a sign of helplessness remain isolated from the space in which he inhabits and persistently wrestles with his perceived inadequacies. Despite the mobility of the daughter-in-law, the character remains detached from her own domestic space. In a defining moment where she confesses her unwillingness to take care of the elderly alone, the film expresses her frustration with a sole focus on her histrionic expression and words.



Fig. 1. Scenes from *The Promise* series showing the focus on human expression and detached from the domestic interior.

### **Resolving the Issue of Space: Replaceable Standardized Homes**

Several times through the series, the plot expresses a need for a larger space to accommodate more family members across generations. In playing out the efficacies of HDB's aid, the story shows the apparently effortless shifts from one location to another despite providing insufficient understanding of and withholding the richness of various domestic spaces. Additionally, the few glimpses of the film sets present an idealized modern home. A study on articles extracted from *Our Home* (1972-1989), a

HDB publication on interior design advice, presents the statutory board's aggrandizement of modernist characteristics within the realm of domestic interior - order, whitewashing, and simplicity (Jacobs and Cairns 2008, 583-86). Similarly, *the Promise* series showcase simple and unadorned apartments with cold white walls. Despite the importance of family portraits and drawings in the plot, these key artefacts remain detached from the domestic spaces.

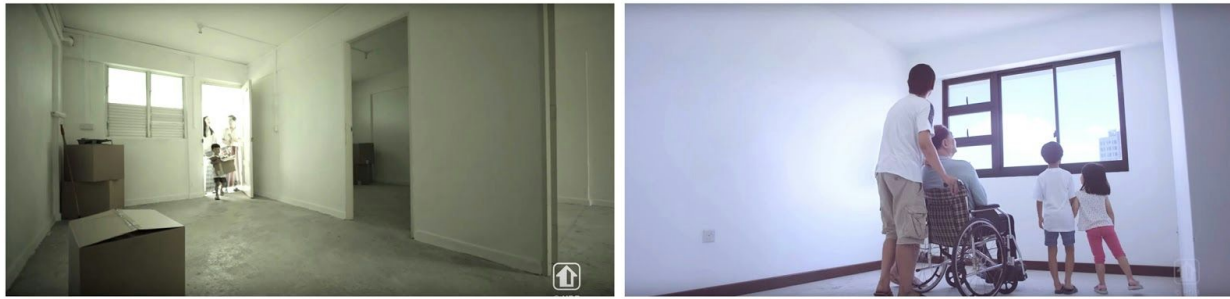


Fig. 2. Scenes from *The Promise* series showing the bare and replaceable domestic interior.

Being highly charged with emotions and melancholy, it captures up-close shots of the various characters, with immaculate details of their facial expressions and speech. With its sole purpose in provoking sentiments within viewers, the film series skirted around the normative perceptions of family life without emphasized representation of the domestic interior. Its estrangement of key artefacts from the immediate surroundings, nameless characters and whitewashed home interiors together serve a standardized anecdote that subverts the richness of domestic culture. Thus, the subsequent sections expounds on the methodical animation of the domestic interior by *Ilo Ilo* to illuminate domestic struggles, juxtaposed with the lack of representation of the domestic interior in *The Promise* series.

### ***Ilo Ilo* : Domestic Struggles through Spatial Narrative**

As first Singaporean feature film to bag an award at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013) chronicles a complex relationship between the Lim family and their newly-hired domestic helper, Teresa, set in Singapore during 1997's Asian Financial Crisis. The title of the film refers to Teresa's hometown in the Philippines, while its Mandarin title offers a translation somewhat melancholic - Dad and Mom are not at home. An analysis of the spatial narratives presented in *Ilo Ilo* contravenes the national narrative of the interior as static, standardized and ineffectual in the portrayal of domestic struggles. Through a close reading of the film, I suggest its various uses of

domestic space to convey concepts of liability, deplorable pasts, patriarchy and secrecy within its domesticity.

### **Liabilities: Contesting Spatial Boundaries**

Chen, understanding the significance of privacy and personification in one's bedroom, presents power relations centered around the protagonist Jia Le through consistently choreographed representation of his small bedroom. The bedroom presents a spatial narrative that reveals the protagonist and his grandfather as liabilities to the parents - in pursuing the Singapore dream, the parents dedicate little time and attention to the adolescent and the elderly.

Jia Le's room was the first to be fully revealed early in the film. Hwee Leng, Jia Le's mother, was quick to introduce Terry to Jia Le's room for familiarization soon after her arrival in the household. The scene promptly sets up Jia Le's room as a space with little boundaries, with his private space consistently encroached upon by someone considered, as least initially, as an outsider. The tenuousness of this boundary of Jia Le's privacy was further exemplified with his futile protest when the mother announced, without his approval and prior knowledge, that the newly arrived domestic helper would be cohabiting his room. The measure of this perimeter is not one that can be defined by the physical location of walls and doors, but only through the parents' skewed perception of their relationship with Jia Le and the degree of privacy the adolescent needed.

When the father lost his job and secretly took up the job of a security guard to continually support his family, he was discovered by Terry to be washing his uniform late in the night. Again, Terry offers to overstep the boundary of vulnerability, which was, this time round, fiercely guarded. At that point, the backdrop of the bathroom was seen as a place of solace and secrecy, where the father insisted on guarding his secret of unemployment, amidst father's immense insecurities from retrenchment. The common bathroom was an alternative to the master bath that was in close proximity to his sleeping wife.

### **A Deplorable Past: Details of the Domestic Space**

The photographic portrait of Jia Le's deceased grandfather and the existing slide-in bed beneath Jia Le's bed also hints of the elderly's presence and former co-inhabitancy of the space. His misaligned

photographic portrait illustrates the family's nonchalance and to a certain extent, disrespect of the grandfather even after his death. The existing slide-in bed beneath Jia Le's, presumably used by the grandfather, establishes the elderly's lowly position within the family. It is in this context that Terry enters the home - expected to fill and inhabit the exact responsibilities and spatial condition. Despite Jia Le's disgruntledness at Terry when she reached out to adjust the portrait of the deceased elderly, thereafter neither he nor anyone within the family sought to do what she had attempted. Hence, the grandfather's portrait in Jia Le's room stood as a mere memory of the elderly, and a disgraceful reminder of the family's demeanor towards him.



Fig. 3. Scenes from *Ilo Ilo* showing the use of objects to convey the concept of liability and a deplorable past.

### **Matriachy and Changing Power Relations: Consistency of Spatial Checkpoints**

The dining room was portrayed as a consistent checkpoint and display of power. Hwee Leng's dominance is inextricably connected to the dining space as she was portrayed as the provider of meals for the family. The increasing closeness between Terry and Jia Le creates potential shifts in power within the very same platform the mother exerts her presence.

After Jia Le's mischief in school that warranted his mother's leave of absence from work, she brought him home. Her casual remarks to him at the access balcony after shutting the main door allows one to presume the calm after a storm. However, after he settled down at the dining table and started to enjoy his lunch, her sudden lashing out and reprimand establishes a particular boundary within which

she perceives and assumes authority and free-will despite the discomfort of another. Jia Le's shock and fear at the display of her wrath, together with her dictation of who deserves food of better quality, emphasizes the particular association posited by the film between the dining room and matriachy.

Though the dining room was strongly tied to the mother's presence initially, the same space gradually loses its patriarchal association as Jia Le communicated his preference for Terry's cooking over Hwee Leng's despite her efforts. Similarly, it was where the boy protagonist also displayed greater affection for Terry over his mother when he persistently requested to be photographed with the help on his birthday.

### **Secrecy: Obscured Spatial Comprehension**

As the parents' private space, the representation of the master bedroom was interwoven and strongly correlated with the secrecy of their lives and thoughts - with the father furtively delving into stocks and the mother's dangerous reliance on fallacies and motivational optimism despite her usual rational self. While the initial progression of the film reveals a comprehensive layout of various rooms, such as Jia Le's bedroom, the living and the kitchen, knowledge of the master bedroom remained elusive. Scenes within the master bedroom were characteristically minimal - capturing mainly various foci and singularities and avoided a comprehensive view of the room. When the camera followed Jia Le's intrusion into the room through the door, the darkness of the room prevented any realization of its physical characteristics. A closer look at how several individuals arrived at the living room from the master bedroom also revealed a second access to the bedroom apart from its main door - a somewhat imperceptible gap between two walls. The film, however, barely revealed further details concerning this access, leaving the viewer uncertain about details of the master bedroom. An analysis of the progressive revelation of the house's spatial layout is explored in a series of impressionist and hypothetical drawings shown in Fig. 4. This suggests *Ilo Ilo's* manipulation of spatial understanding to support its recurrent theme of secrecy and unveiling of the character's actions and thoughts.





Fig. 4. Author's uncovering of the spatial layout based on the film's spatial narrative throughout its progression. Legend: 1.Access Balcony; 2.Dining Room; 3.Living Room; 4.Kitchen; 5.Hallway; 6.Jia Le's Bedroom; 7.Master Bedroom; 8. Suggested Secondary Hallway. The series of impression hypothetical drawings show uncertainty with regard to the details of the master bedroom and a potential secondary hallway.

## **Conclusion**

Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013) distinguishes itself from the HDB's *The Promise* (2014-15) series through its effectual employment and celebration of the domestic interior to support its narrative. Despite both media encompassing complex domestic struggles, *Ilo Ilo*'s methodology highlights the intricacy and multifacetedness of the living space inextricably tied to its occupants, and calls for appropriate representation and eminence of the conception of 'home' within the national narrative. A comprehensive understanding of the domestic interior remain pivotal in evaluating normative and politicized representation of a home, a subject unquestionably fundamental in our existence.

(Word Count: 2378)

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