

**WHERE THE HOUSE BEGINS**

Tracing the interiorscape in a subdivided Pearl Bank apartment

by

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## **Abstract**

From being the tallest residential block in Southeast Asia in 1976, to becoming the first condominium petitioned for voluntary conservation in 2014, the modernist Pearl Bank Apartments is an experimental subject of architecture and property ownership in Singapore. In a bid to monetize their old apartments, some owners are renting out or subletting part of their homes. These shared domestic interior spaces are investigated in the author's childhood home, a subdivided apartment in Pearl Bank that is now inhabited by several individual tenants.

Furthering Michel de Certeau's notion of thresholds, this dissertation examines how in a co-lived setting such as the subdivided apartment, the domestic interior does not necessarily begin at its conventional physical thresholds. The word *interiorscape* is borrowed from Katsuhiko Miyamoto and Graeme Brooker to refer to this ambiguous spatial condition. Partitioning the house for co-living constructs two spatial narratives that concurrently operate in the same apartment, visible in the traces that both mirror and thwart enactments of status quo domesticity. Emulating Robin Evans' reading of the plan with narrative materials, the author's biographies and illustrations of these traces in space illuminate the domestic interior of the subdivided Pearl Bank apartment that now performs in its non-private, multiple and ambiguous state.

Conserving Pearl Bank would mean monumentalizing it by stabilizing and isolating its physical material in a specific moment in time. This dissertation argues that this stands in conflict with Pearl Bank's architectural heritage that has been built by the combined agency of the occupant and the architect over time. The research presents an architectural-biographical re-entry into the author's childhood home, as well as an alternative speculative documentation of Pearl Bank's architectural heritage from a sociohistorical perspective. Biographical details and literary narratives are used in combination to re-inhabit the apartment's complex interiorscape— as a space once lived by the author, and today, co-lived in by others.

Keywords: Domestic interior, Interiorscape, Pearl Bank, Conserve, Monument, Singapore

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Kin Kit, for always being a step ahead of me

And my family, for being my sure source of comfort.

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## THE STORY OF PEARL BANK

Turning over forty years old in 2016, Pearl Bank Apartments merits governmental protection as an architectural icon constructed during the nascent years of Singapore's industrialization. Singapore's building conservation particularly focuses on preservation and keeping original structural and architectural elements intact.<sup>1</sup> When a building is preserved, its consequent status as a monument is thought to be inextricable.<sup>2</sup> But preservation grants monuments through the ennobling of the object with little consideration of the immaterial complexities that have elevated it to importance. Thus, I will first outline the history of Pearl Bank, providing the context of how it has emerged as a potential subject of building conservation.

News of the highly anticipated Pearl Bank Apartments began to appear in *The Straits Times* from the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, the first prize winner of Singapore's National Sports Promotion Board draw was promised a "dream home", a two-bedroom apartment unit high on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor of Pearl Bank.<sup>4</sup> Construction work for the apartments had begun on Pearl's Hill, a choice building site within the district of Outram. Outram was the seedbed for major urban developments such as the Outram Park housing project by the Housing Development Board (HDB) and the sanitization of Chinatown. In the same year, Queen Elizabeth II walked down the spartan streets of Chinatown on her first royal visit to Singapore<sup>5</sup>, where she observed the fruits of the former British colony's independence. Completed in 1976, Pearl Bank Apartments epitomized the rapidly developing and modernizing Singaporean landscape of its time.

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<sup>1</sup> "Conservation Guidelines." Urban Redevelopment Authority, December 2011. <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/guidelines/conservation/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/Guidelines/Conservation/Cons-Guidelines.ashx>.

<sup>2</sup> Vinegar, Aron, and Jorge Otero-Pailos. "On Preserving the Openness of the Monument." *Future Anterior* 9, no. 2 (Winter 2012): iii – vi.

<sup>3</sup> "Going up in S'pore S-E Asia's Tallest Flats," *The Straits Times*, July 13, 1970. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19700713-1.2.121.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Mok Sin Pin, "Going UP and UP—\$20M Project Where a 'Dream' Home Is," *The Straits Times*, August 21, 1972. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19720821-1.2.91.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> "Chinatown," Government Website, *Chinatown | Infopedia*, accessed August 14, 2016, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_734\\_2005-01-24.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_734_2005-01-24.html).

Amidst the diasporic movement of people from *kampongs*<sup>6</sup> to HDB point blocks, Pearl Bank belonged to a type of housing that catered to middle-income groups. The 38-storey modernist tower stood out with its pure cylindrical shape and ambitioned to be Southeast Asia's tallest residential building of the time.<sup>7</sup> As the first all-housing project by HDB's Urban Renewal Department<sup>8</sup>, Pearl Bank was an experimental model of high-density, high-rise living. It was attractive in its unique split-level spaces characteristic of semi-detached bungalows known to house the wealthy.<sup>9</sup> Continuous shear concrete walls slice the building into fan-shaped apartments of four sizes stacked in an interlocking formation. The arched slab block shields the interior from the harsh tropical climate while also allowing spectacular views. Staying true to the modernist open plan, apartment interiors were minimally partitioned, generously letting in breeze and daylight.

The architect Tan Cheng Siong imagined Pearl Bank to be the archetypal home for the Singaporean family of the 1970s. Expecting the apartments to be bought up by young families with young children, Tan incorporated a childcare in the podium block and some shops on the first storey.<sup>10</sup> Two-storey staircases protruding from the inner rim of the building connect the corridor to the bedroom on the bottom level of each unit. These bedrooms were given an extra back door as they were meant for domestic helpers,<sup>11</sup> allowing them to access the kitchen without traversing through the more private and intimate spaces of the home.

Each lift served two units per floor, thus increasing privacy. Considerations were also made for people who were moving into the apartments from relatively low-rise settlements. The 27<sup>th</sup> floor harnessed the first concept of the void deck where people could mingle lest they felt deprived of

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<sup>6</sup> 'Kampong' is a Malay word that refers to urban slums in this context.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Lim, "Fish-Eye View of a Sky Breaker," *New Nation*, December 2, 1975, sec. Local News.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Cornelius, "Pearl's Hill," Government Website, *Pearl's Hill | Infopedia*, accessed August 14, 2016, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_116\\_2004-12-14.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_116_2004-12-14.html).

<sup>9</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p10

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p17

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p15

street interaction.<sup>12</sup> From inside the apartment, the window ledge was designed to prevent people from looking directly downwards from a high altitude.<sup>13</sup>

However, in the first two years after Pearl Bank's completion, only a number of units were bought. This modest uptake was attributed to its intimidating height— fifty storeys compared to the tallest building of its time which was a mere nine storeys.<sup>14</sup> Some buyers were dissuaded by bizarre myths, such as birds flying in and eating food off tables.<sup>15</sup> In 1978, “there were unoccupied flats practically on every floor.”<sup>16</sup> The Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC) quickly snapped up some sixty apartments sold below their original prices.<sup>17</sup> A year later, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) bought all eight penthouses on the top floor and furnished them for resale to civil servants and statutory board employees.<sup>18</sup> They were subsequently sold out in two months.

Buying the apartments through these government organizations appealed to people as they could be paid for through the Central Provident Fund (CPF)<sup>19</sup>, a compulsory savings scheme upheld by the monthly contributions of employers and employees. Government organizations strove to instate Pearl Bank as affordable elite housing. Unsurprisingly, the first inhabitants of Pearl Bank included esteemed government officers and the well-to-do.

Pearl Bank is one of Singapore's oldest examples of strata-title ownership. Strata-title ownership is a scheme that issues separate individual titles to units of houses on different levels, resulting in

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<sup>12</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 29

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Tan, “Pearl Bank Apartments,” *Pearl Bank Apartments : State of Buildings*, accessed August 14, 2016, <https://stateofbuildings.sg/places/pearl-bank-apartments>.

<sup>14</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 25

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Teo Lian Huay, “HUDC to Buy 60 Pearlbank Flats,” *New Nation*, December 13, 1978. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19781213-1.2.2.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “8 Penthouses for Sale to Govt Officers,” *New Nation*, October 27, 1979.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19791027-1.2.16.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> Janice Heng, “HUDC and the Story of Housing Windfalls,” *The Straits Times*, February 1, 2014. <http://business.asiaone.com/property/news/hudc-and-the-story-housing-windfalls/page/0/4>.



multiply owned high-rise apartment blocks. The enduring feature of Pearl Bank is that it is “actually not an apartment— it is a piece of land in the air”<sup>20</sup>. The Land Titles (Strata) Act in Singapore facilitates the distribution of land into strata, the collective sale of property and the disposal of titles.<sup>21</sup> As bungalows in the sky, the apartments represented a new housing typology enabled by a new type of property ownership in post-independence Singapore.

Bound to a 99-year state leasehold as a piece of private property, Pearl Bank has unfortunately devalued and physically deteriorated over the years as owners find no incentive to maintain the compound. Its Shanghai plaster finish has chiseled off the building through wear and tear. The management resorted to placing shipping containers on the entrance walkway below to protect people from falling debris.<sup>22</sup> Private properties like Pearl Bank with less than sixty years left on their lease cannot be paid through the CPF fund, and few banks would grant loans for such properties.<sup>23</sup>

Still, some were drawn to Pearl Bank in its declining years for its beautiful spaces. One of these unlikely buyers was my family, who acquired a penthouse apartment in 1996. I lived together with my extended relatives as a child, altogether twelve people in one household that included our Indonesian domestic helper, Sumi. Years ensued, and the period of time was spent bonding with the other children over feeding bread to the turtles in the pond downstairs, feeling miserable when we were put in the childcare, and wading in the large Jacuzzi in our apartment. Despite the aging of Pearl Bank in those days, we endeared ourselves to its spaces as home. These things quickly changed when the dwindling economic value of Pearl Bank beckoned its demolition and redevelopment.

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<sup>20</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 29

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Tan, “Pearl Bank Apartments,” *Pearl Bank Apartments : State of Buildings*, accessed August 14, 2016, <https://stateofbuildings.sg/places/pearl-bank-apartments>.

<sup>22</sup> Lesley Koh, “Containing the Danger,” *The Straits Times*, December 6, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> “Extend Leases?,” *The New Paper*, October 23, 2000.

A combination of factors drove some owners to rent out or sublet their apartments in a frantic attempt to monetize the remaining of their depreciating property. The 2007 property boom was marked by the influx of foreign buyers who saturated the real estate market.<sup>24</sup> This raised rental yields for 99-year developments like Pearl Bank, as foreign buying interest was unaffected by leasehold.<sup>25</sup> Coinciding with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, this was an opportune time for owners in Pearl Bank to rent out their apartments or call for a collective sale, also known as an en bloc sale. Since the late 2000s, there had been much speculation over the en bloc sale of Pearl Bank. Greedy en bloc proponents in the condominium's managing body, the Management Corporation Strata Title (MCST), kept their eye on the prize.

In time, my family moved out too. The apartment had no buyers, so renting it out was the next option. Maintaining the empty space would be too costly. After subdividing the apartment, the new rooms were sublet together with the existing bedrooms to individual foreign tenants. There are eight sublet units in this apartment. After some years, two units were merged to accommodate some of my extended family members. They live together with several tenants in the other units who each only stay for about a year. In this co-lived space, groups of people have been brought together by economic considerations, illustrating how the house has turned from home to asset.

Pearl Bank survived three attempted en bloc sales. To the relief of its architect Tan Cheng Siong, Pearl Bank's MCST was swapped, and the new council started to advocate for voluntary conservation.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, Pearl Bank owners signed to request for a conservation order from the government, in the hope that this would redevelop the building and extend the 99-year lease, restoring its monetary value. Whereas an en bloc sale would require 80% agreement, conserving the

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<sup>24</sup> AJ Leow, "Outlook Is Rosy for Property Market," *The Sunday Times*, March 25, 2007, sec. PROPERTY.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p35

building would require a 100% agreement amongst the owners.<sup>27</sup> If approved, it would undertake an unprecedented mode of conservation in Singapore as a modernist residential building.

After more than fifty years of independence, Singapore's government has been gearing towards more progressive modes of conservation, where conservation is no longer solely the protection of architectural types inherited from the colonial era. Representative modern buildings from the post-independence era after the 1960s are increasingly regarded as key to the national narrative of historical, economic and social development. However, Singapore's conservation methods for modern buildings still closely aligns with those executed on pre-independence architecture like the shophouse. These include the careful retention and restoration of the original design intent, the original appearance, original architectural features and building interiors.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, the approval of Pearl Bank's conservation would kick-start a redevelopment of the building by the addition of a new block. In this case, the preservation of the building's original form that had been central to Singapore's conservation methods would be compromised in its execution. Tan Cheng Siong, who remains as the architect heading the refurbishment, intends for the interiors in this new block to be even more flexible and easily altered, such that "when the next conservation comes, ...the interior can be adjusted to achieve even higher value."<sup>29</sup> This preemption reveals economic incentive as the main driver of the building's conservation, as well as the architect's perceived agency in designing monuments for the future.

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<sup>27</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 35

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p 36

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 1.1 Preliminary design scheme by Archurban Architects*

Citing a lack of prettiness, Head of the URA Conservation Unit Kelvin Ang believes that “modern architecture is challenging to celebrate because... there is very little of the element of the handmade in it.”<sup>30</sup> Apart from its emotional value, the public value of conserving Pearl Bank’s apartments has also been questioned as they are homes that will be kept by people. However, Pearl Bank’s scenario is special as it has overturned a system that usually causes the demolition of buildings to instead, drive a new method of conservation.<sup>31</sup> Today, the final outcome of Pearl Bank is still undecided.

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<sup>30</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 40

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 32

It was against this uncertainty about the future of Pearl Bank that I made my visit back to my childhood home on the 37<sup>th</sup> floor. The uncanny jumble of old and new interior walls and spaces confounded me. Looking around, I strained for traces of the home in my memories. Where does this house begin?

But the most unforgettable things were the walls themselves. The stubborn life of these rooms had not let itself be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that were left, stood on the narrow remnant of flooring, crouched under the corner beams where a bit of interior still remained.<sup>32</sup>

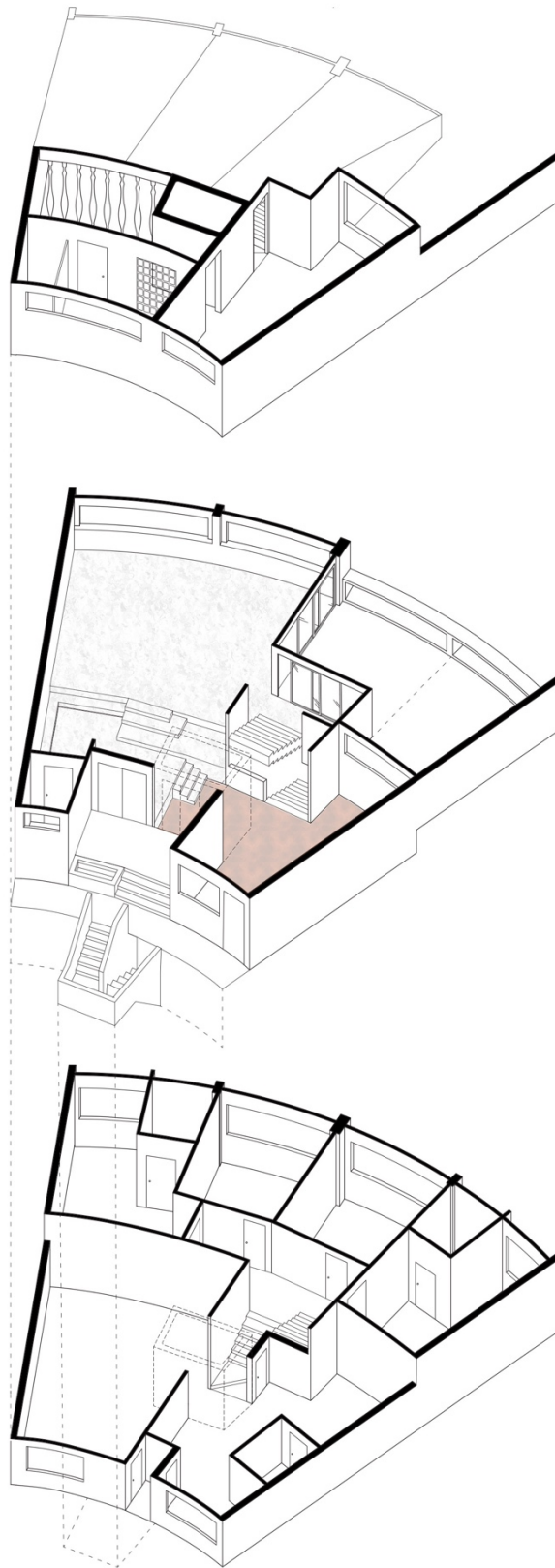
The visit made me curious about the stubborn lives of the strangers who had come and gone through my childhood home. I wanted to know how these new partition walls had made my re-entry into this interior one of ambiguity and confusion.

From inside of this subdivided apartment, it is dim and the air is stagnant. The landlady is proud of the renovations of her house, as the presence of strangers— mostly foreigners— cannot be felt. They cannot hear each other through the armour of walls, and she is only aware of them when they hold parties on the rooftop garden. However, she notices that some travel often. “No light in their room at night.”, she says. Light from their windows only emanates from the exterior facade of the apartment. Standing along the corridor of the apartment tower, we see the windows of hundreds of households, eclectic in their various colours and styles. Vertically, the tower is serrated with staircases that create a visually-arresting labyrinthine pattern. In some of these staircases are pockets of green— potted plants— that sit with small clothes racks. In the planter box outside the house, a bed of flowers splays among pebbles.

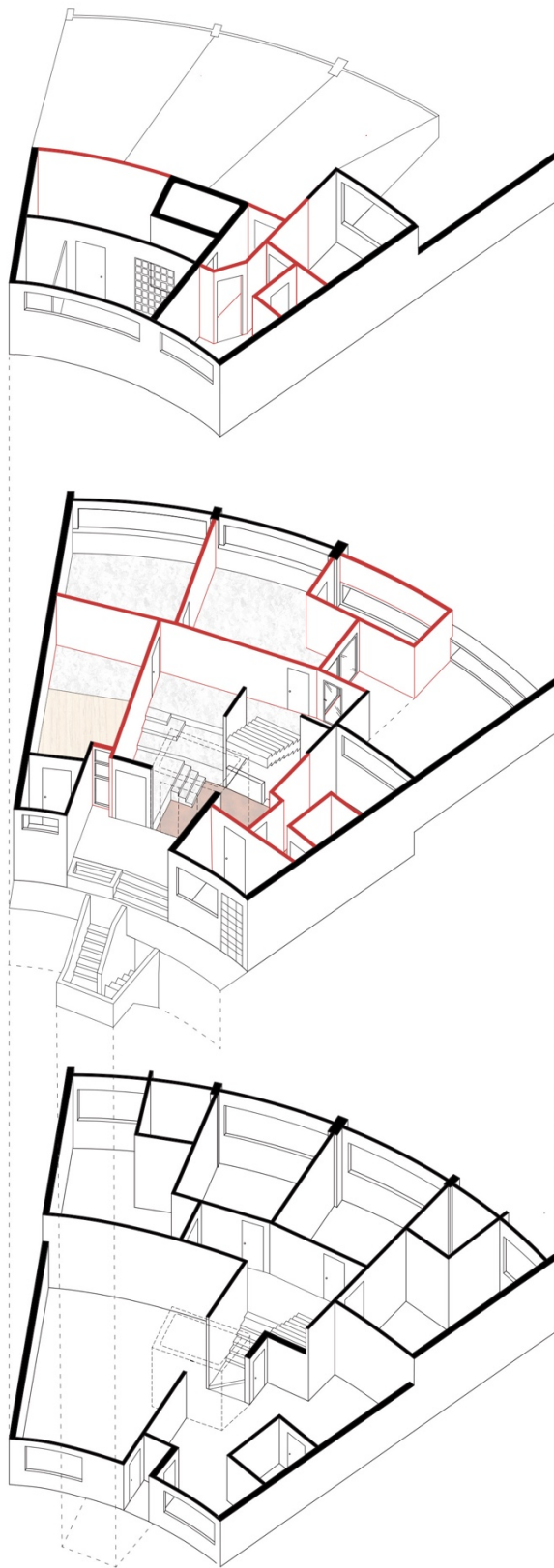
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<sup>32</sup> Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), p 50

From outside the apartment, these are the intriguing signs of life. The inside is a plebeian contrast, vacant and obscure. Every door is shut tight and the spaces behind them, forgotten.



*Figure 1.2 Pearl Bank penthouse apartment before partitioning*



*Figure 1.3 Pearl Bank penthouse apartment after partitioning*



## FINDING SPATIAL NARRATIVES BEHIND THE PLAN

I sat down with the current landlady to sketch rough plans of the partitioned apartment. She knew these walls and spaces by heart and drew them with ease. By watching her sketch the plan, I began to understand which walls had originally been there, and which had not. This is because the partition walls had to be drawn in relation to the walls that were already there. This sequence of drawing shows that there were different ambitions for each iteration of the apartment. Every line added on to the original plan was a wall that now allowed strangers to live side by side.

With every wall, a new door had to be drawn in. A platform had been laid over a flight of stairs and a bed now sits on it. Where a room almost ended up with no windows at all, a small slit had been made. The finished drawing was a collection of these oddities that would go unfelt. When we look at the final plan, the individual tenants are assigned into neat cul-de-sacs. But it is unknown how each of these tenants would move through the spaces after walking through the first entrance door. To see any sequence in its spatial arrangement, one would have to understand the habitual maps of its occupants. The inside of the apartment contains lived traces that speaks of such patterns. But the orthographic drawing alone does not explain these things, and the confusion I felt on my first encounter with the apartment.

When Robin Evans examined the plan in *Figures, Doors and Passages*, he wrote that “[o]rdinary things contain the deepest mysteries”<sup>33</sup>. The traditional articulation of domestic arrangement is the architectural plan, marked by walls, doors, windows and stairs that define spaces. They are unquestioned by the routine of habits that pass through them. But where we find privacy, shelter and comfort may not be where these elements have come to prescribe for us. Their ordinariness allows the affective qualities of our domestic interiors to go unnoticed. Feelings of inclusion and

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<sup>33</sup> Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors, Passages,” in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978), p 56

exclusion, comfort and discomfort, familiarity and unfamiliarity, protection and exposure, may all exist in a space bound by physical thresholds. Perhaps there is a universal expectation that physical thresholds produce the interior and exterior by creating permanent conditions of privacy. This is reflected in the way we draw our plans, and our failure to acknowledge the spatial narratives behind them that have been concealed from us.

Evans attempted to uncover these narratives by examining paintings and novels that had been created in the same time period and context the plans of buildings had been constructed. The carnality of human figures in the painting of Madonna, and the social gatherings depicted in *The Courtier* illuminated the intermixing of rooms in the plan of the sixteenth century Villa Madama as the architectural format of an amoral society.<sup>34</sup> Several others after Evans have developed the line of research on spatial structures of architecture that mirror and affect social conditions.

Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson's *The Social Logic of Space* is a broad exposition on the nature of space and its accountability to a "a variety of spatial behaviours which human societies exhibit"<sup>35</sup>. Projecting this in *Decoding Homes and Houses*, Hanson studies the genealogy of the English house to illustrate how domestic space may codify cultural information in its materiality, form, configuration, and household artefacts.<sup>36</sup> In *Chinese Spatial Strategies*, Jianfei Zhu examines the Forbidden City as an apparatus of power in the conception of Beijing, unearthing the imperial ideologies that have been embedded in the spatial layout of the city.<sup>37</sup> In the more recent *Tropics of Discourse*, Abidin Kusno traces how the geopolitical context of Southeast Asia in the 1980s has re-invented its architectural regionalism over time.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors, Passages," in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978)

<sup>35</sup> Julienne Hanson, *Decoding Homes and Houses* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Jianfei Zhu, *Chinese Spatial Strategies: Imperial Beijing, 1420-1911* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Abidin Kusno, "Tropics of Discourse: Notes on the Re-Invention of Architectural Regionalism in Southeast Asia in the 1980s," *Fabrications* 19, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 58–81, doi:10.1080/10331867.2010.10539658.

Emulating Evans' method, the plan of the subdivided Pearl Bank apartment may be understood in the social context of a literary biography paired with illustrations of significant objects in space, to unravel something more. The social, historical and cultural context of the time Pearl Bank Apartments was designed, built and lived is intrinsic in the shaping of its domestic interiors. Conserving Pearl Bank would mean monumentalizing it by stabilizing and isolating its physical material in an immortal state. This stands in conflict with Pearl Bank's architectural heritage that has been built by the combined agency of the occupant and the architect over time. I will begin illustrating this by foregrounding the recent transformation of the subdivided apartment.

The partitioning of my childhood home drives the construction of two concurrent spatial narratives. One belongs to the collective inhabitation of its current occupants, and the other belongs to me. Two sets of visible traces found within the apartment in its domestic objects, the building fabric and architectural *boundaries* narrate these two stories. The first set reflects the current co-lived space, while the second thwarts my expectations as a previous inhabitant of the flat. Encountering these traces alters how one might experience the beginning of the apartment's interior. The traces simultaneously mark old thresholds and recalibrate new ones. Revealing the oscillation between these two sets of traces in the apartment demonstrates how its domestic interior now performs in its non-private, multiple and ambiguous state, becoming an *interiorscape*.

*Interiorscape* is a term introduced by Katsuhiko Miyamoto and Graeme Brooker to reference an ambiguous spatial condition.<sup>39</sup> The word *scape* is often suffixed to elements in the outdoor environment to suggest a strong phenomenological presence, such as landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes and nightscapes. Yet each of these environments is ambiguous in character, each "a setting yet to be assigned a particular identity or designated a specific use."<sup>40</sup> The word *escape* is "the

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<sup>39</sup> Katsuhiko Miyamoto and Graeme Brooker, "Disquieting Interiorscapes: Two Houses," in *Nomadic Interiors: Living and Inhabiting in an Age of Migrations*, ed. Giuseppe Marinoni (Milano: SMownPublishing, 2015), pp.333-346

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p 334

act of gaining liberty through egress,<sup>41</sup> and tangentially gives *scape* another meaning as something fleeting and ephemeral. The definition of *interior* itself is abstract and has evolved with time, and only from the nineteenth century, became commonly understood as space inside. When the words *interior* and *scape* come together, “the indistinctness of their meanings is amplified, creating an uncertainty about where or what this type of environment is or can be.”<sup>42</sup> Though the interiorscape gives feelings of ambiguity and instability, its multivalent qualities are distinct and traceable.

To trace an interiorscape is to trace the crossing of boundaries. It turns our attention to thresholds as interstitial zones. Explaining how an actual boundary does not have the character of its cartographical representation, Michel de Certeau described how the threshold acts as a point of contact that establishes a middle ground of exchanges and interviews. The interaction:

“‘turns’ the frontier into a crossing, and the river into a bridge. It recounts *inversions* and *displacements*: the door that closes is precisely what may be opened; the river is what makes passage possible; the tree is what marks the stages of advance; the picket fence is an ensemble of interstices through which one’s glances pass.”<sup>43</sup>

De Certeau’s thresholds are two: the ‘frontier’ that delimits privacy, and the ‘bridge’ that directs movement toward the exterior.<sup>44</sup> The threshold limits and mediates, stops and continues, disperses and collects, hinders and directs. Its manifestation does not end at the wall, door, window and stair. The way a threshold behaves rests on its psychical construction, which may be in correspondence with other objects, people and tangible enactments of memories. Where the threshold guards against ‘alien’ exterior elements, it also contains them. It is an intermediary site of movement which may also be a gulf that cannot be crossed. George Teyssot expands the threshold from line to

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<sup>41</sup> Katsuhiko Miyamoto and Graeme Brooker, “Disquieting Interiorscapes: Two Houses,” in *Nomadic Interiors: Living and Inhabiting in an Age of Migrations*, ed. Giuseppe Marinoni (Milano: SMownPublishing, 2015), p 334

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p 336

<sup>43</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p 127

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p 126

territory, where a threshold is “a medium that opens between two things.”<sup>45</sup> The threshold is made mutable, negotiable and expandable through our encounter with it.

These ideas, together with the traces seen in the subdivided apartment, help to redefine the spatial geometries and possibilities of ‘threshold’. Rethinking the threshold enables us to view how the two sets of traces in the subdivided apartment project the domestic interior in diverse, tentative and ambulant ways.

What follows is a biographical re-entry into the subdivided apartment. Through this method, I attempt to uncover traces of an interiorscape that cannot be seen or felt from the architectural plan drawing. Mapping these traces will also begin to talk about another life of the house— one that illuminates the colours and textures of domestic life in a modernist apartment which has been stereotyped to some extent. Civil servants, foreigners and families have come and left their marks in the building. These have not been and will continue to remain undocumented in Pearl Bank’s modernist architectural history. These, however, are important indicators of how the domestic interior has evolved with every appropriation and re-appropriation of the households that have thrived here, and the apartment building which accommodated them.

Domestic spaces may be experienced vicariously through literary narration as it contains and evokes sensation. Sophia Psarra proposes that like architecture, narrating spaces with literature structures experience. In the process of reading and writing, “fictional and spatial narratives are inseparable.”<sup>46</sup> Literature plays a distinctive role in creating architecture, subsuming individual perceptions and affectations in its production. In the process of being read, its meaning is simultaneously shifted, modified and revised. In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes explains how the way a text is

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<sup>45</sup> George Teysot, “A Topology of Thresholds,” *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 89–116, p 91

<sup>46</sup> Psarra, Sophia. “‘The Book and the Labyrinth Were One and the Same’: Narrative and Architecture in Borges’ Fictions.” *The Journal of Architecture* 8, no. 3 (2003): 369–91. doi:10.1080/1360236032000134853.

read often contradicts its author's intentions, thereby being continually reconstructed by "hybrid author-readers who both make and consume a work."<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Hill identifies the production of architecture with Barthes' observation, concurring that architecture comprises of both design by architects and inhabitation by its users.<sup>48</sup> Architecture is thus constantly read and authored by the combined agency of the architect and the occupant.

Therefore, together with biographic details, this essay uses stories about shared living in literary texts to collectively re-inhabit the complex interiorscape in the subdivided Pearl Bank apartment. This allows the reading of possible relationships between the phenomenon of the interiorscape with the practices of co-living that have been proliferating in the modernist Pearl Bank apartment block.

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<sup>47</sup> Hill, Jonathan. "An Other Architect." In *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, 77-90. London: Routledge, 1998, p 80

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p 79

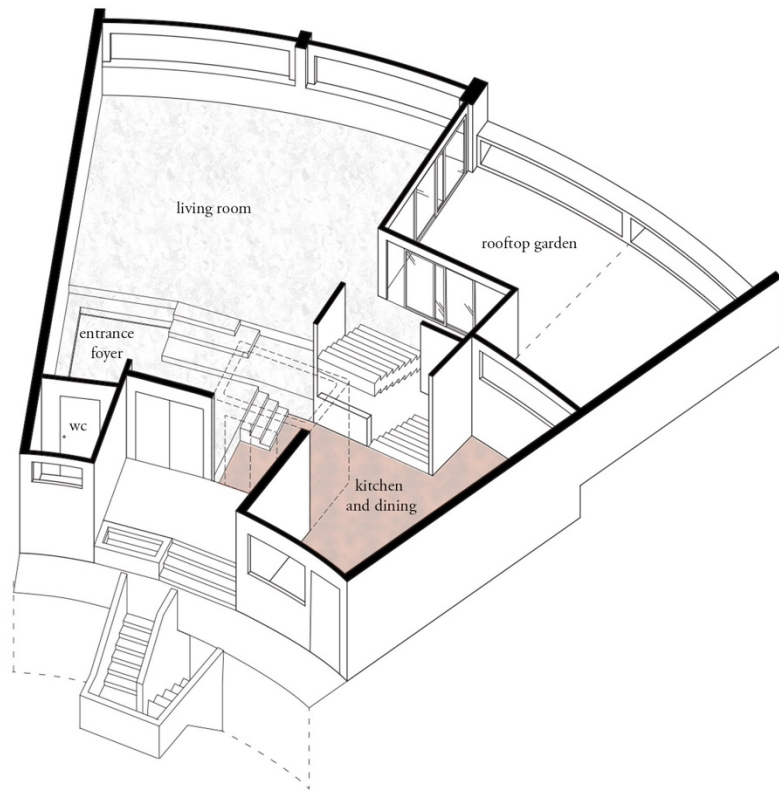


Figure 2.1 Before (above) and after (below) axonometric of entrance floor

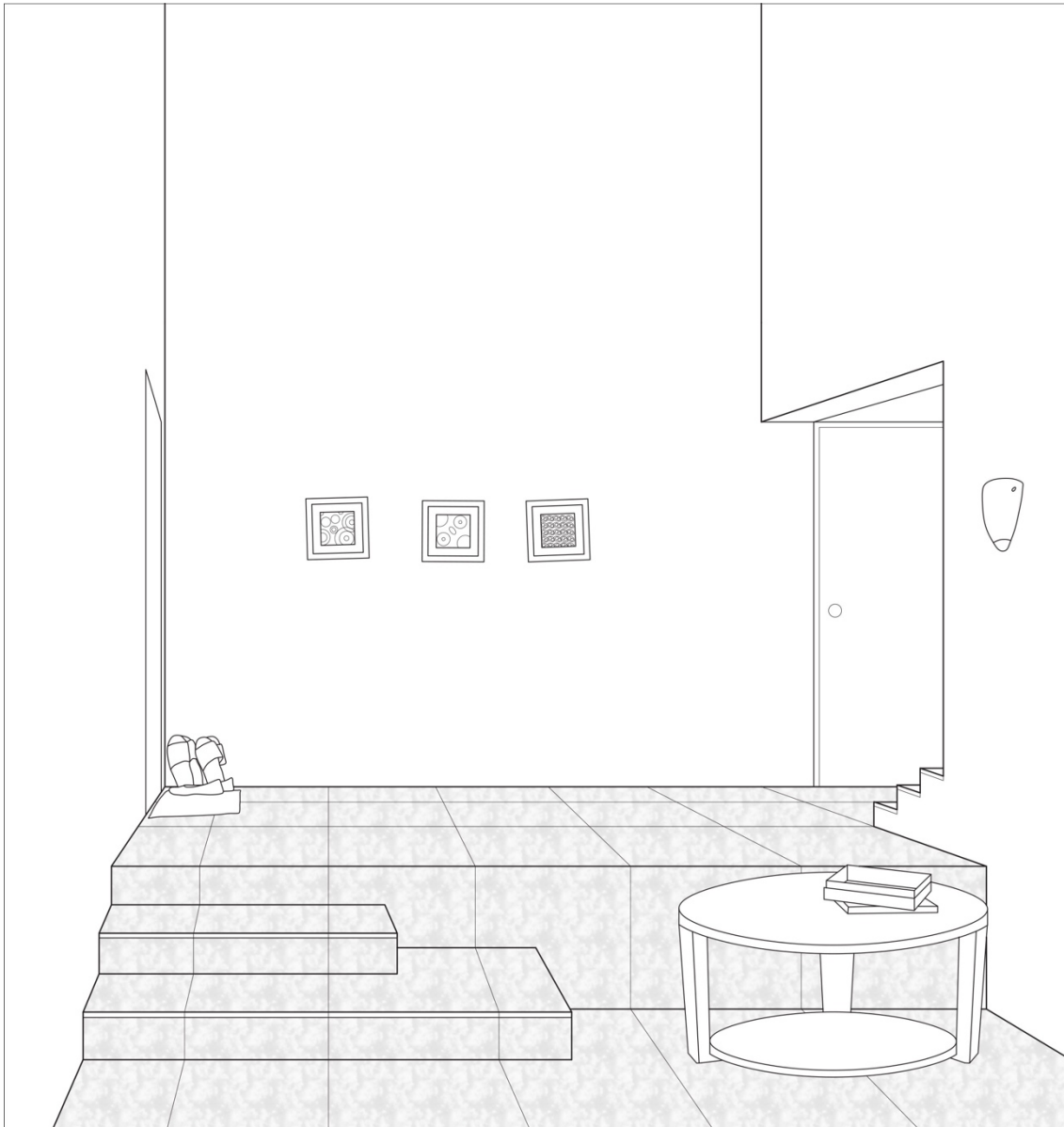
## ENTRANCE FOYER



*Figure 3.2 Elevation of the front door*

The apartment is first introduced to me from the elevation of its front door. The right side of the metal gate is left ajar, while the left side is closed over a row of recessed windows. The main entrance door is compressed to only half the width of the gate. As I waited for the landlady to come to the door, I squinted into the dark glass panels to catch a glimpse of the inside, but my eyes meet with a screen of wooden blinds. The white gate had remained the same all these years, but I was certain the door behind it had changed.





*Figure 2.3 Marble tiles disappearing beneath high partition walls*

Opening the entrance door, I come to realize that I am not yet inside the landlady's apartment. From the left, a wall cuts through the ascending steps. At the end of the wall I see a door with an unusual shoe collection sitting neatly on a rubber door mat furled at its ends— a pair of red ballerina flats and two pairs of muddied hotel bedroom slippers. There is a film of dust settled on the marble floor left by a trail of unknown footsteps. I promptly keep my shoes on. On the round

table, there is an empty mooncake box where everyone collects their mail. The entire apartment rests in silence.

The window I had seen from the outside cannot be found inside the entrance foyer. After walking up the steps, the next wall begins after two and a half tiles. On this wall, three square picture frames of about 300mm by 300mm are seen to be installed by hooks at an uneven spacing. The size of the artwork seems disproportionate to the wall behind it that soars for two storeys to meet the ceiling. I discreetly enter the space, not knowing if anyone is home.

Only these objects tell of the people who now quietly share the apartment. The atmosphere is banal and uninviting. But for me, the experience through this space could not be more disparate and disarming. When I was a child, the entrance foyer had been the focus of the flat. It was a space that each family member had to pass through in order to get to the living room, kitchen, dining room and the bedrooms. Its white walls are now sullied, as if oxidized by sunlight that seems to appear from nowhere as windows and walls have been beguilingly obscured or repositioned. I wondered if behind these walls I would find the old living room I knew, furnished with its large blue leather sofas, where birthday celebrations were had and piano music once filled the space. In my mind, this space behind was an airy one, where my grandmother used to sit and await her children's return.

But for now, the voice beside me is echoing through a newly enclosed air well. The owner is telling me that co-living is *not* Singaporean culture. She does not want to join the garden parties held by the *ang-mohs*.<sup>49</sup> In her own words, she calls this 'an apartment within an apartment'. The tenants are forgettable as they stay only for a year.

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<sup>49</sup> A Hokkien slang word for Caucasians.

The owner lives in the loft unit above her tenants. There, she presides over the household without fraternizing with them. The previously capacious entrance foyer has become a dark, neglected and impersonal passageway that functions as a semi-private space for those leaving and returning to the apartment. The solid partition walls that give privacy to the landlady's tenants are the same walls that allow her to move through unseen and unnoticed. The entrance foyer, an intermediary space between the individual units, is simultaneously a fortified space that guards against any visual or aural communication across it. It is devoid of domestic objects or people.

The sofa and piano in my memory are essential belongings — pieces of furniture— that structured the domestic interior. Jean Baudrillard wrote that “[h]uman beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value.”<sup>50</sup> This production of the interior gives our childhood homes “such depth and resonance in memory”<sup>51</sup>, where objects become boundary markers of home.<sup>52</sup> The removal of these essential marker objects is acutely felt in the blankness of the partition walls. In its place, an odd-sized space has been left in the middle. A family object of greeting, the Yamaha piano that used to be positioned at the edge of the living room, would now be disproportionately unwieldy in this diminished entrance foyer.

The previous occupancy of the apartment is not completely erased but made anonymous in the smallest and most incongruous details, such as the shortening of the cascading steps unmatched by the immense height of the ceiling that suggests the formerly well-lit space, and the row of marble tiles that abruptly disappear beneath the partition wall. Undoubtedly these traces are almost imperceptible to a stranger, but they leave me, someone who lived here in her childhood years, confused and estranged.

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<sup>50</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Structures of Interior Design,” in *The Domestic Space Reader*, ed. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 210–14, p 211

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

While the wall and the door are the basic manifestations of threshold, we have an inchoate sensitivity to lines and surfaces of discontinuity— traces that confirm that the threshold is also a haptic sense. Simon Unwin explains that “[t]he primary manifestation of the seam”<sup>53</sup> is the door, but “often there are subtle nuances associated with the opening that reinforce its role.”<sup>54</sup> The threshold is enforced by the slight raise of the door jamb, the material difference of the floor and other mundane subtleties that slip by our consciousness. The home is thus a bodily analogy that is, as Tonya Davidson suggests, not “simply triggering already registered memories,”<sup>55</sup> but itself a tangible sum of memories. From the time I first entered the apartment, the incongruence of these traces was palpable. The front gate that obstructed a window made little sense.

In William Dean Howells’ novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the middle-class protagonists Basil and Isabel March travel from Boston to New York to look for a sublet apartment in a formerly single family house. Their decision to settle in this apartment hinged on their very first impression upon viewing the house.

It was a large old mansion cut up into five or six dwellings; but it kept some traits of its former dignity, which pleased people of their *sympathetic* tastes. The dark mahogany trim, of sufficiently ugly design, gave a rich gloom to the hallway, which was wide and paved with marble; the carpeted stairs curved aloft through a generous space.<sup>56</sup>

The receded glamour of the mansion, though gaudy and dated, seemed to compensate the dreariness and loneliness of the subdivided quarters. The florid design of the interior bore traces of its previous wealthy inhabitants who decorated and adorned excessively, and its opulence

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<sup>53</sup> Simon Unwin, *Doorway* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p 82

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Tonya Davidson, “Remembering Houses: The Role of Domestic Architecture in the Structuring of Memory,” *Space and Culture* 12, no. 3 (August 2009): 332–42, doi:10.1177/1206331209337078, p 334

<sup>56</sup> William D. Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), p 49

accentuated the spaciousness of its entrance. Isabel March was pleased with this sight, and urged her husband to take the room if it was “like the rest”<sup>57</sup> of what they had seen. Their first impression of the hallway constructed an imagination or expectation of the other rooms in their minds. It negotiated and eased the awkward boundaries that brutally divided the house into several rooms. In a house that had been lived by many, traces of occupancy can be seen and grasped. These traces are cumulative, thereby amassing inscriptions of different characters, events, time periods and histories.

Something as minor as the material of the floor may speak more about what this apartment has come to be through a history of its occupancies, alluding to the erosion of this architecture’s status symbol. Referring to URA’s resale of the Pearl Bank penthouse units, a newspaper article described the way in which they were refurbished to the appeal of government officers and civil servants: “All four bedrooms and the inside staircases in each apartment have parquet flooring. The living room has marble flooring, the dining room ceramic tiles and the bathrooms, mosaic.”<sup>58</sup> In the original 1976 Pearl Bank Apartments sales brochure, it begins with the following text: A house or a flat is a status symbol. It has always been and will be so.<sup>59</sup>

All these point to a period when Pearl Bank was considered a luxury home. The floors that had once glistened with privilege remain materially, but its lustre has worn off. Walls cut through them, and occupants sully them by walking with their shoes on, a practice which is uncommon in Asian domestic interiors. To walk with shoes in a space is to regard that space as not of one’s own, somewhere impersonal and public. Mirroring this scene, the character So-yang in *A Room in the Woods* retorts, “I don’t want to walk barefoot anywhere outside my room, even in the hallway.”<sup>60</sup>

Resenting her family members, So-yang alienated the rest of the house outside of her room as her

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<sup>57</sup> William D. Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), p 49

<sup>58</sup> “8 Penthouses for Sale to Govt Officers,” *New Nation*, October 27, 1979.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/newnation19791027-1.2.16.aspx>

<sup>59</sup> “Pearlbankapartments 04|01archive.” *Pearl Bank Apartments: A Singapore Housing Icon*. Accessed August 30, 2016. <http://www.pearlbankapartments.com/04.01archive.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> Sök-kyōng Kang, Chi-wōn Kim, and O Chō-hūi, “A Room in the Woods,” in *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*, trans. Bruce Fulton and Ju-chan Fulton (Seattle, WA: Seal, 1989), 28–147, p 64

exterior. Simply plodding around with shoes transforms space into an exterior. The wearing of shoes in an interior space implies an act of resistance to contamination and foreignness.

In some corners and crevices of the entrance foyer, we see the leftover cement grit between the wall and the floor. Little signs like these make these spaces unhomely. The presence of shoes, dust and dirt in the entrance foyer contribute to a sense of an exterior of the outside within a domestic interior. This echoes Jonathan Hill's sentiment that the inhabitation of the user is an intrusion to the work of the architect. Here, the inhabitant becomes an 'illegal' architect, deemed as a contaminant.<sup>61</sup> In this subdivided Pearl Bank apartment, the 'illegal' architect has acted, undoing the modernist spatial intentions of the original architect by the dissection of spaces for co-living.



*Figure 2.4 Door into the rooftop garden seen from the entrance foyer*

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<sup>61</sup> Hill, Jonathan. *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*. London: Routledge, 1998, p 3

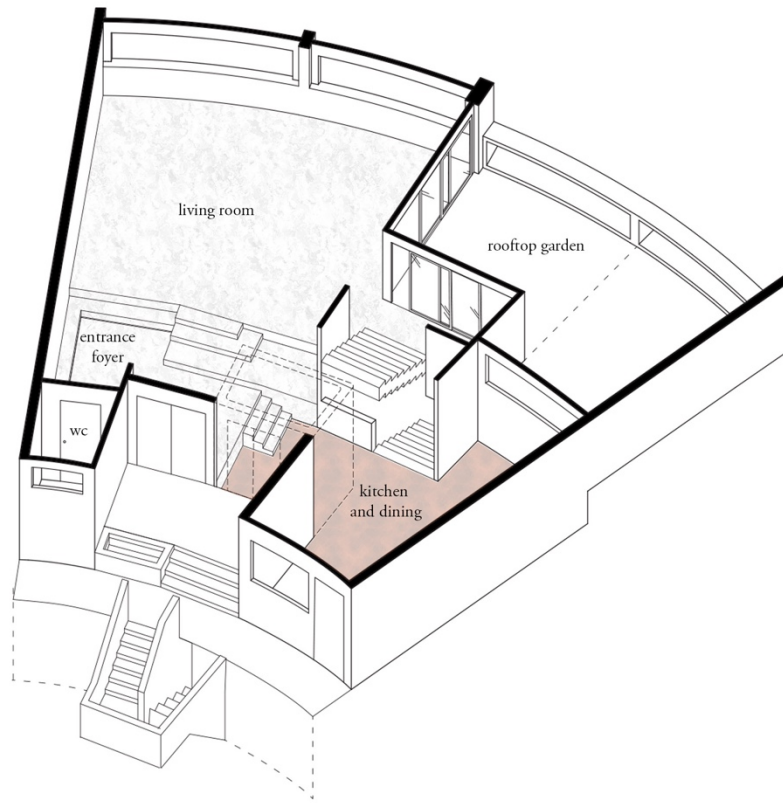


Figure 2.5 Before (above) and after (below) axonometric of entrance floor

## ROOFTOP GARDEN



*Figure 2.6 Line across the top of the glass door*

After I pass through the entrance foyer, the next door I see belongs to another tenant. An aluminum-framed glass door beside it opens to the rooftop garden. A line beginning from the top of the door cuts across the wall, revealing where the newly-installed gypsum board meets the old walls. This confirms my suspicions that part of the rooftop garden had been enclosed in order to make extra space for the sublet unit. Before this, the garden used to be visible on entering the apartment, a space framed by sliding glass doors. I remember how the living room was brightened with a backdrop of overgrown shrubs in planter boxes and multicoloured bamboo poles used for hanging up our laundry. Now, the access to the garden is reduced to a murky corridor.





*Figure 2.7 Entering the rooftop garden*

The aluminum-framed door swings back and forth to the movement of the breeze. It sags and drags against the floor, making shrill screeches until the next gust of wind slams it shut. Opening this door, I am confronted with a tiny and awkward space between the garden and a tenant's room. There are a few potted plants and a barbeque grill. Underneath the parapet, there are boxes of old gardening tools that used to belong to my grandmother, who was an avid gardener. Hanging from the peeling soffits are planter hooks with frayed raffia strings still tied onto them. The garden that had been is now ramshackle, rusted and weathered.

Looking through the sliding glass door on the left, I see that the furnishings in the tenant's room are run-of-the-mill, with a lack of personal bric-à-brac save for four bottles of wine and a box of chocolate on the cabinets. Perhaps the most peculiar is the collection of things beneath the window ledge: a mini fridge, a microwave, some bottles of detergent and a roll-out storage compartment.



*Figure 2.8 Interior of sublet unit*

Every sublet is furnished by the landlady, and any furniture in the rooms is replicated across all the units. Together with the relatively short tenancy of the sublets, this has resulted in scarce personalization of the interiors. The sublet units are divided and organized in a hotel suite configuration consisting of a bedroom and a living room with a small area for basic cooking appliances. Minimal in its provisions, the layout instills a living pattern where tenants spend most of their time away from home. Occupants in these sublets change constantly and frequently.

In my old garden I have turned into a voyeur, trespassing and looking into a tenant's home from the space that used to be pruned and adorned by my grandmother's bougainvilleas, pet turtles and hamsters. The tenant today lives in what used to be the living room. I was curious about what had taken over the spaces between the living room and the garden. This liminal space is where two stories of past and present converge.



*Figure 2.9 From the middle of the garden*



Several incongruous details appear in the garden today. Unlike the entrance foyer whose compression could be felt from the unreasonable height of the walls, the reduction in the garden's size is not immediately perceivable. Only from the middle of the garden do I discover that behind the potted plants, discoloured white partition walls sit snugly beneath the ochre coloured walls of the original structure. Again, as I had seen in the entrance foyer, the floor tiles of the garden are partially interrupted by the partition walls that have been installed to make space for the tenant's unit. A partition wall ends at the edge of the niche below the parapet. This niche that once housed our small pets is now hidden behind the length of the new partition wall.



*Figure 2.10 From the window of the landlady's unit*

Above the garden, large windows look over it. This brings back the reality of the present occupancy of the space. From the window of her unit, the landlady monitors the flat, making sure tenants do

not use this space to smoke as it is a fire hazard. Beyond that, she is nonchalant about what happens in the garden. Her family does not regard the garden as part of their home. Foreign tenants frequently host friends and parties here, particularly on occasions like National Day where they are treated with a view of the firework display. From an outdoor haven that almost exclusively belonged to my grandmother, this space has become sterile and provisional.

I personally encountered a Caucasian man who sat here drinking with two young ladies on bar stools one night. The party attempted to make small conversation with us. My grandmother, who was with me, exclaimed heartily, “*I no speak engris!*” and continued in the Teochew dialect that the flat is really different now. Like my grandmother, many people often feel bewildered when they return to previous homes that have been rapidly gentrified or substantially transformed.

With the presence of strangers and foreigners in the apartment, this garden no longer belongs to us. In *The Vomiting Incident*, Cyril Wong recalls his childhood home, a four-bedroom flat in the public housing estate of Singapore’s Bedok South where he and nine other family members lived with an unknown Eurasian couple. He is disconcerted by their presence in cramped living quarters, and narrates,

...[n]obody explained to the children, including me, why we had an unmarried Eurasian couple living with us in the same flat. Perhaps they were close friends whom my grandfather decided to take in. Maybe they actually were godparents to one or more of the children, but I was never truly sure.<sup>62</sup>

In the beginning of the story, Wong tries to reconcile the couple’s presence with their unconfirmed status as “godparents”, reflecting an inherent need to identify members of the household as family.

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<sup>62</sup> Cyril Wong, “The Vomiting Incident,” in *Balik Kampung 2B*, Second (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2016), 35–47, p 35

Yet, “nobody cared enough to find out,”<sup>63</sup> and the duo was never again mentioned in the rest of the story about strife, frictions and tensions in an overcrowded flat of twelve people. Singaporeans reside within family-centric households where outsiders are not easily integrated. The tenants and the landlady’s family live apart from each other, and this separation is especially telling in the ways they each perceive the shared garden.

Zygmunt Bauman located the roots of unwanted intimacy of shared living in the city, in the way people ignore or avoid each other “to epitomize the ‘strangeness’, the unfamiliarity, the opacity of the life setting”<sup>64</sup> to be expelled from homes. In other words, exteriorizing the other whilst living in the inescapable yet obtrusive proximity of strangers. Perceived as a space for foreign tenants, the garden is an integral space within the apartment that has been exteriorized by those who refuse to share it. It reflects how transnational co-living has not yet become acceptable among Singaporeans, unlike in the United States where Lizzie Widdicombe identifies co-living as a “specific stage in the modern bourgeois life cycle”<sup>65</sup> a transitional phase of experimentation with communal living carried forward from college dorm living arrangements. Like the garden and living room that have been changed by the insertion of partition walls and new patterns of domestic occupancy and movement, the lives of the landlady’s family and the foreign tenants are separate, divided and inaccessible to each other.

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<sup>63</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “On The Difficulty Of Loving Thy Neighbour,” in *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, illustrated, reprint (Wiley, 2003), 176, p 106.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p 106.

<sup>65</sup> Lizzie Widdicombe, “Happy Together: Why Give up Dorm Life,” *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/16/the-rise-of-the-co-living-startup>.



*Figure 2.11 View from parapet looking over the stairwell*



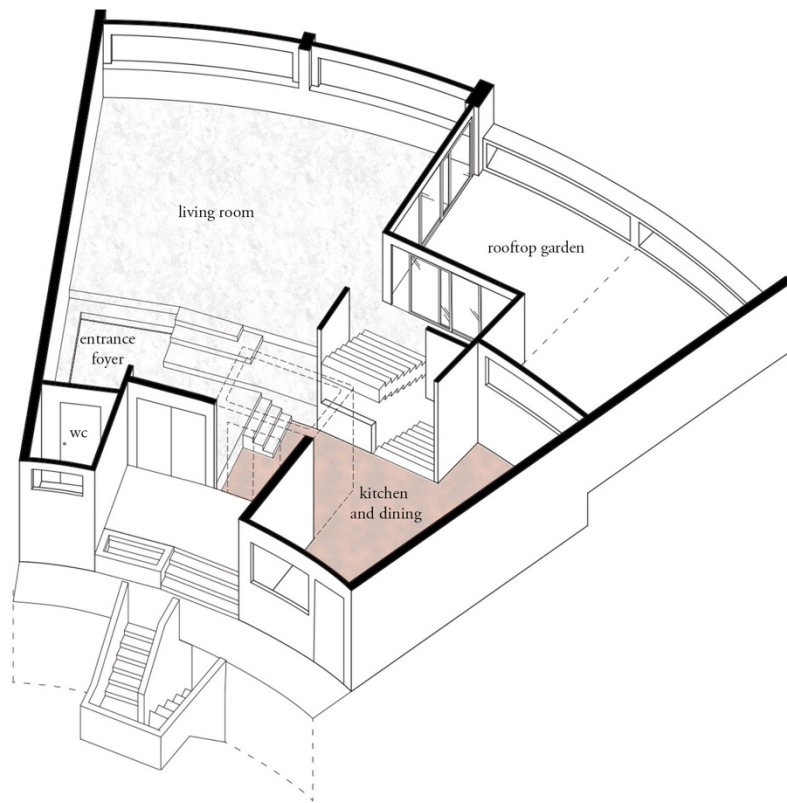
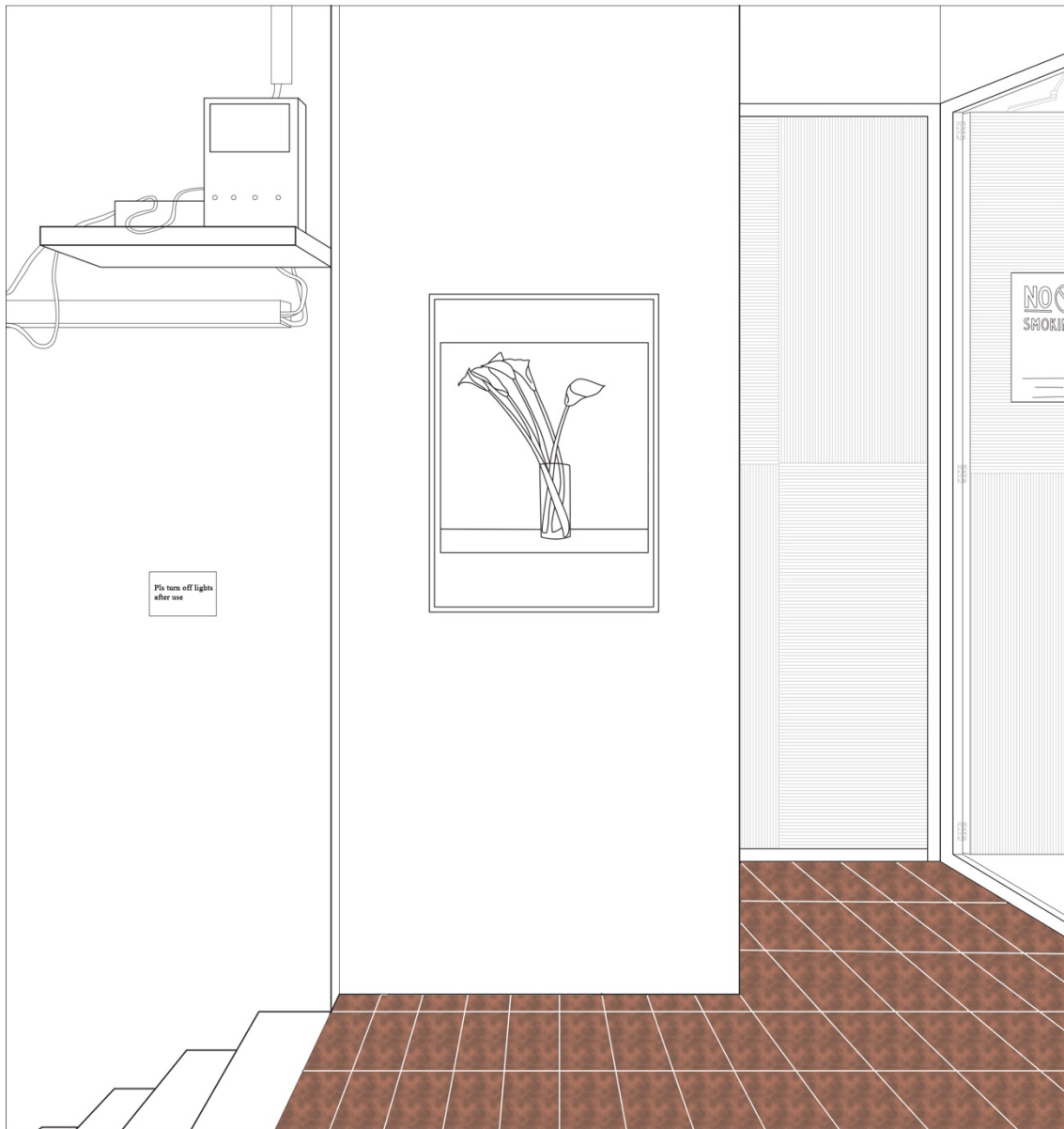


Figure 2.12 Before (above) and after (below) axonometric of entrance floor



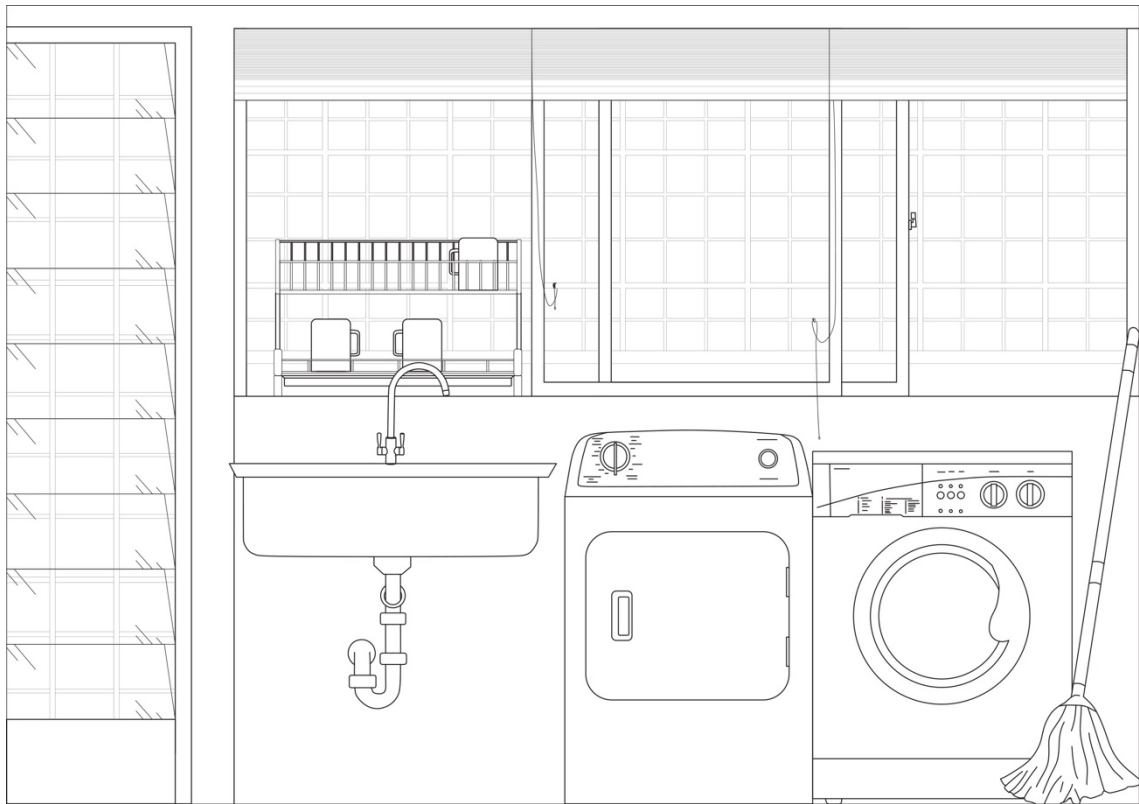
## LAUNDRY ROOM



*Figure 2.13 Broken wall and two doors joined at the edge of their frames*

As I walk down the stairs from the entrance foyer towards the laundry room, I see a high wall that has been obviously broken into two parts. The first segment of the wall aligns with the white grout lines of a row of terracotta tiles, and breaks off at the second segment which begins slightly behind the first. Straddling a staircase, the first wall segment is unusually fitted with some accessories: a

couple of sockets and a shelf with modems and routers at a two-meter height. The second wall segment had been added in to enclose space for a tenant's unit. To the right, two doors are peculiarly adjoined at the edge of their door frames. The door with a 'No Smoking' sign leads into the laundry room.



*Figure 2.14 Door in laundry room sealed by louvre windows*

Once, behind the broken wall was the dining room. With this space now tenanted, all the housekeeping functions are condensed within a liminal space between the corridor and the flat. In this small laundry room of no more than eight square metres, the ceiling is again disproportionately high at about 3.5 meters. This narrow and tall space contains two washing machines, two dryers, a sink and a rubbish chute. There are a few mugs on the dish rack on the ledge above the sink. Before this space came to be, it was a bright and airy kitchen facing a dining room.

Sumi, our domestic helper when I was a child, wore a skirt in the kitchen every day, rewashing dishes that had already been washed before. While she washed the dishes, Sumi would engage in long conversations with the construction worker who stopped by daily outside the kitchen window.

Now there is not a waft of soapiness in the kitchen. Sumi, who stood in the kitchen for hours on end, is gone too. The space in the laundry room is too constricted to linger for hours, and the door on which she used to lean has been sealed off by louvre windows. Above the rubbish chute, there are some notices asking residents to keep the premises clean and smoke-free. Every fortnight, a lady comes to clean up the space for sixty-eight dollars. It is irksome when government officers come to inspect the space. A few months ago, someone looked into this space and reported it to the URA.



*Figure 2.15 Laundry room seen from the corridor*

The landlady's only desire is to keep this space clean and tidy without pests and congestion. She has her own washing machine as she does not want to share her appliances with strangers. Outside next to the staircase, small clothes racks have been provided for manual drying. Sometimes, clotheslines are erected on the balcony, particularly by the Asian lady who prefers to take advantage of the hot sun. These little instances tell us how the tenants negotiate between their spaces to take turns to do laundry hygienically according to their preferences. In her study of laundry routes, Sarah Pink insists that they are “part of the whole experience of moving through and around the home”<sup>66</sup>, being “related to perceptions of indoors and outdoors, ...[and] on social relationships in the home and on existing spatial arrangements.”<sup>67</sup>



*Figure 2.16 Laundry hanging on the rooftop garden*

Examining the laundry room as a liminal space, we can begin to uncover the underlying narrative operations that shape the way it is currently being used. It echoes De Certeau's idea that the

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<sup>66</sup> Pink, Sarah. “Making the Sensory Home: Laundry Routes and Energy Flows.” In *Situating Everyday Life: Practices and Places*, 66–83. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012, p 11

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

“narrative operations of boundary-setting... bring movement in through the very act of fixing”<sup>68</sup>.

Here, the boundary organizes a series of spaces that are instrumental in composing bodily movement. Domestic interiors are often conceived by the structuring of memory through habits and actions in the house. Joëlle Bahloul credits the “woof of remembrance”<sup>69</sup> in shaping the domestic realm, where the multi-sensorial and the spatial-temporal movements of boundaries and people are key. We may think of the domestic interior as marked by a dual force of event and the boundaries that narrate and mobilize this interior.

As the building aged, a few isolated criminal cases in Pearl Bank may have generated unjustifiable sentiments about the building. In 1989, two men were arrested for using one of the apartments as an illegal betting information centre.<sup>70</sup> Pearl Bank’s penthouses are ideal as rental dormitories as they are about 4000 square feet each. Compared to the standard five-room HDB flat (usually measuring approximately 1184 square feet), these are very spacious.<sup>71</sup> Examining the way in which the apartment he bought had been subdivided, the American architect Ed Poole noted that there were at least forty foreign students living there once.<sup>72</sup> URA’s subletting guidelines state that each occupant has to have at least 10 square meters of space with a maximum cap of eight occupants.<sup>73</sup>

While renovating his unit, Poole “ripped out fourteen truckloads of debris consisting mainly of false ceilings, wires, ducting, grimy cabinets, make-shift partitions, gaudy tiles and... non-structural

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<sup>68</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p 129

<sup>69</sup> Joëlle Bahloul, “Telling Places: The House as Social Architecture,” in *The Domestic Space Reader* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 259–63, p 260

<sup>70</sup> “16 Arrested in Raids on Bookmaking Operations,” *The Straits Times*, April 2, 1989.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19890402-1.2.23.4.aspx>

<sup>71</sup> “Gov.sg | Have the Sizes of HDB Flats Been Reduced over the Years?,” Government Website, *Gov.sg*, (September 11, 2012), <https://www.gov.sg/factually/content/have-the-sizes-of-hdb-flats-been-reduced-over-the-years>.

<sup>72</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p28

<sup>73</sup> “Approved Residential Properties Are for Long Term Stays. How Do I Know If a Residential Property Is Put to an Inappropriate Use?,” Government Website, *Urban Redevelopment Authority: To Make Singapore a Great City to Live, Work and Play*, accessed August 24, 2016, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/guidelines/development-control/change-use-premises/sections/yv-Permissible-Uses/Landed-Housing/subletting.aspx>.

interior wall[s].”<sup>74</sup> He found shelves of beer in the kitchen. It was as though the previous occupants had been told to evacuate urgently.<sup>75</sup> His apartment was not a unique case. In 2000, an elderly widow was arrested for letting her apartment to five Indonesian overstayers; the apartment had five rooms, but a Chinese national who had been living there reported that there were fifteen people living there at one time.<sup>76</sup> However, Poole favours the common corridor because it encourages safety by the community’s mutual policing, and with the added possibility of instigating chance encounters with neighbours.<sup>77</sup>

Through the fixation of walls, mundane laundry tasks are brought to the forefront of the subdivided apartment. This exposure to the corridor presents an ambivalent narrative which could taint domestic propriety with misconceptions of illegitimacy and vice. The simple act of doing laundry comes under scrutiny as laundry hanging along the corridor is visible to the public eye, raising suspicions in the laundry room’s multiple appliances and unconventional position at the front of the house. Documenting her visit to the apartments as an outsider, Teri Lim recounts that “the inward facing corridors made it feel like [they] were constantly being watched by someone.”<sup>78</sup> The proximity of the corridor to the laundry room renders its continual surveillance.

Therefore, the olfactory, aural and haptic experiences of doing laundry are curtailed by a strict reign over hygienic practices, home security and mutual privacy between tenants. Unlike the ritualistic act of cleaning that breeds familial intimacy in a home, doing laundry in this subdivided apartment is a precluded attempt to sanitize the entire Pearl Bank complex of the possibility of unfavourable narratives.

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur Sim, “Rough and Ready: Ed Poole’s House of Contradictions,” *The Straits Times*, February 2, 2002, sec. LIFE! DESIGN.

<sup>75</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 29

<sup>76</sup> Alicia Yeo, “Foreigners Seen Moving in and out,” *The Straits Times*, September 29, 2000, sec. HOME.

<sup>77</sup> Geraldine C. T. Quek, Kevin Josiah J. H. Neo, and Teri Y. L. Lim, *Conservation Conversations* (Singapore: Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2015), p 30

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p 35

The space had not been occupied for years, and sat along a small lane in the Upper Thomson area. Prior to us, a construction company had stored its materials behind the bolted doors. Rumours of sex work still drew foreign workers to our doors, looking for leisure. By the time we were done with the place, it probably drew more attention to itself than it had before.<sup>79</sup>

In her autobiography, the Singaporean novelist Tania Rozario and her housemates were notably unperturbed by questionable occupant histories, even deliberately intensifying the provocativeness of her property by use of red paint and chalk doodles on the exterior. Like De Rozario's story about the sublet house in which she lived, the stubbornness of illicit narratives may continue to perpetuate long after the property has been vacated or re-appropriated.

Keeping these narratives at bay has been particularly important in the collective bid by the development's liaison committee for a revamp and renewal that would secure the government's approval for the conservation of the building. Current apartment owners are eager to sell their property, and the conservation status would not only double the value of their homes, but also give extra floor area overall for sale to developers.<sup>80</sup> Apartment owners are protective of their homes, especially avoiding any appearance of illegalities in their tenancy practices. Thus, the laundry room has become a purported display of privacy, sterile and straitlaced, to segregate itself from people's imaginations grounded in any of Pearl Bank's undesirable narratives. Living patterns associated with housekeeping have thus been modified, influenced and regulated by the exterior glance.

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<sup>79</sup> Tania de Rozario, *And The Walls Come Crumbling Down* (Math Paper Press, 2016), p 9

<sup>80</sup> Yen Nee Lee, "Six More Months for Pearl Bank to Get Owners' Nod for Conservation," *Today*, October 22, 2015, sec. Singapore, <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/pearl-bank-apartments-gets-another-6-months-get-resident-consent-conservation-project>.





*Figure 2.17 Staircase leading to the landlady's unit*



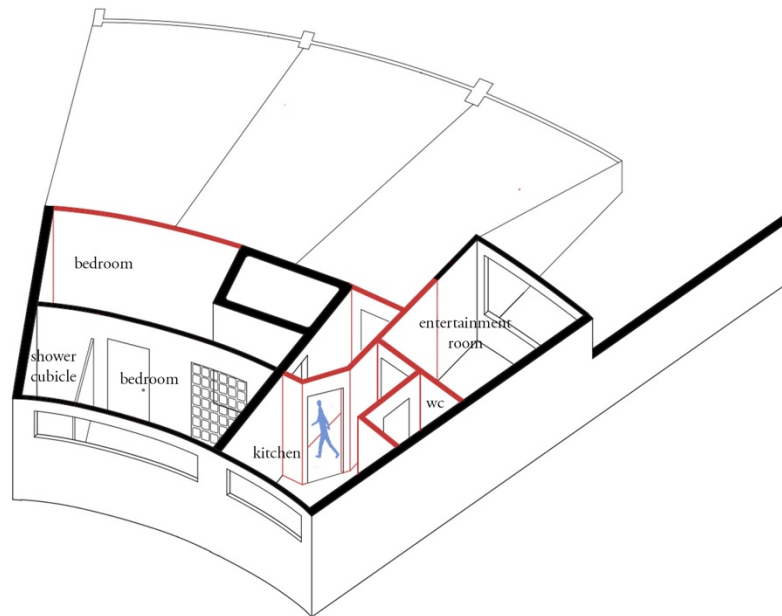
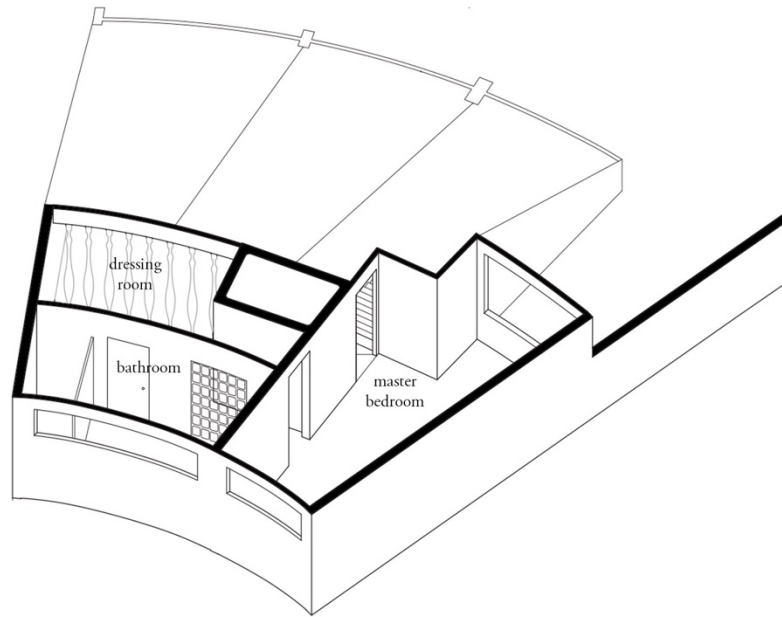


Figure 2.18 Before (above) and after (below) axonometric of loft floor

## TWO JOINT UNITS



*Figure 2.19 Truncated parapet wall and running cord covers*

After merging two of her sublet units into one, the landlady and her family moved in. When I was a child, these two sublet units had been one master bedroom. The staircase leading up to her unit has the same old parquet finish from my childhood, but the entryway is strange. A full-length wall that used to enclose the master bedroom has been truncated into a parapet wall. Various knick-knacks decorate the top of a cluttered shoe rack that leans against the parapet. From this point

onwards the space is considered the landlady's home. Cord covers cut across the wall and along the ceiling, passing through the door frame. The entrance door does not have buffer space around its borders as it had been added in after recent modifications.



*Figure 2.20 In the L-shaped corridor*

Entering the home, I am greeted by a two-meter long L-shaped corridor space of about a meter wide. At the corner of the L-shape, an opening left by the removal of a door leads into the kitchen.

This corridor had been a shared conduit between two sublets. In this dark and narrow space, the cord covers run across the ceiling, ending at a pendant lamp. Although barely visible in the shadows of the corridor, the walls have been decorated with pictures and cuckoo clocks. In the limited capacity of space around this corridor, a contrived domestic arrangement has been created. Only the kitchen is a discernible space in the enfilade sequence of rooms containing haphazardly mismatched furniture and objects— jars of condiments beside bottles of soap, blackboard and to-do lists behind the TV set, and cabinets of crockery beside bookcases.

The apartment which the janitor unlocked for them... had rather more of the ugliness than the dignity of the hall. But the rooms were large, and they grouped themselves in a reminiscence of the time when they were part of a dwelling that had its charm, its pathos, its impressiveness. Where they were cut up into smaller spaces, it had been done with the frankness with which a proud old family of fallen fortunes practises its economies.<sup>81</sup>

In William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the sublet apartment is finally introduced to Basil and Isabel March. Only a few of its rooms let in light through small windows, while "the rest of [the apartment] must darkle in perpetual twilight"<sup>82</sup>. Yet upon inspection of the apartment, something draws Isabel's fondness of it despite its ugliness, as she begins to imagine each of the rooms for different members of her family. She had wanted a parlour for herself, a study for her husband, and individual rooms for her two daughters. Domestic interiors are very much constructed and assembled by the mind, and the architect Italo Rota goes as far as to say "the true job of the architect is to reveal the space of the human mind"<sup>83</sup>. And the mind is often subject to personal tastes and quirks. There is an emergent space caught between the strict public and private

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<sup>81</sup> William D. Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), p 49

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Italo Rota, *Cosmologia Portatile. Scritti, Disegni, Mappe, Visioni*, ed. Francesca La Rocca, vol. 8 (Quodlibet, 2012), p 61

that is composed of domestic elements, where the reinvention of objects and furniture mentally modifies spaces of inhabitation, so inhabitants eventually come to love them.<sup>84</sup>



*Figure 2.21 In the landlady's kitchen*

In Pearl Bank, we witness appropriation and patterns of living that effortlessly fill into the oddly subdivided spaces of the landlady's apartment. Studying these processes begins to winnow out signs of which the desire for familial intimacy, convenience and comfort attempt to overwrite physical thresholds. The kitchen is filled with a copious number of appliances, equipment, and fixtures as though they come from many different rooms. Behind the wall that delineates the corridor is a private room for watching television, web surfing, reading, dining, and sipping wine. It is apparent that the conventional arrangement of formal domestic spaces no longer matters. In this house, the

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<sup>84</sup> Italo Rota, *Cosmologia Portatile. Scritti, Disegni, Mappe, Visioni*, ed. Francesca La Rocca, vol. 8 (Quodlibet, 2012), p 61

disappearance of the living and dining rooms is indicative of the prioritization of the kitchen and an entertainment room that contains a mélange of objects for rest and recreation.

However, in the original Pearl Bank Apartments sales brochure, the text and images boast a bright and lustrous living room attached to a double-volume atrium core. This interior component was somewhat marketed in the 1970s as a key selling point:

### Living Room

Every condominium unit, be it two-bedroom, three-bedroom or four, has a luxurious, spacious and well-designed living room. With the addition of elegant and functional furniture that evokes a pleasant ambience, visitors can feel at home.

The windows of the living room face the harbour, offering a vast, beautiful and unobstructed panoramic view.<sup>85</sup>

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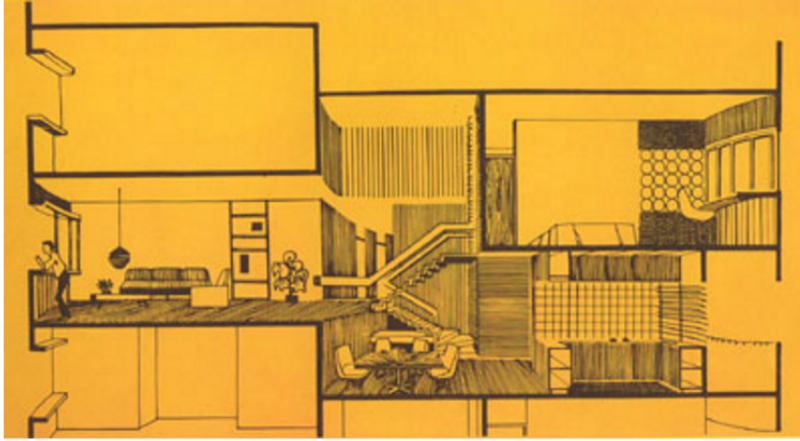
<sup>85</sup> “Pearlbankapartments 04|08archive,” *Pearl Bank Apartments: A Singapore Housing Icon*, September 16, 2001, <http://www.pearlbankapartments.com/04.08archive.htm>. Translated by author.



## 客廳

每間公寓，不論是兩房，三房或四房式，都有一間堂皇寬濶，設計美觀之客廳。加上高雅舒適之傢具，更增加優美享受的氣氛，使客人有賓至如歸之感。

客廳窗戶，面向海港，視野廣闊，全無遮礙，遠近明媚風光可一覽無遺。



*Figure 2.22 Section of Pearl Bank brochure advertising living room*

The living room had been meant as a place of receiving visitors and making first impressions, but occupants today have little to no use for it. Occupying spaces and rooms in the subdivided apartment has turned into a means of interpretation, selection and rejection, always negotiating between the contingent and necessary. Tania de Rozario's recollection of her sublet house makes no mention of common formal domestic spaces like the living room or the bedroom. Selection and usage of rooms seem arbitrary, distributing spaces for work and rest, where artists use the "kitchen as workspaces." Sharing the house this way was "ideal" in her perspective, as she relished in the humble abode that was made home by the daily collective creation of beautiful artwork by her and her tenants:

You and I shared two rooms— one to sleep in and one to work in. We sublet the rest of the house to other artists who used the third room and the kitchen as workspaces. It was the ideal home. A place everybody could afford, in which beautiful things were created every day.<sup>86</sup>

Sebastien Martinez Barata et al. credit the "diffuse and dialogic collaboration between the architects and occupants"<sup>87</sup> in constructing living spaces. Furniture, in particular, has become an important indicator of slippages that maneuver through "the rigid space of architecture that does not allow them to perform their increasingly standardized and controlled function"<sup>88</sup>. The act of mediation transfers from architectural thresholds to furniture. In *Interiors: Notes and Figures*, Barata et al. view these slippages, or "symbolic glitch[es]"<sup>89</sup> as most intriguing in the way they subvert rules of space in every slight reorientation and re-adaptation. The landlady's apartment is an array of these

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<sup>86</sup> Rozario, Tania De. *And the Walls Come Crumbling Down*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2016, p 9

<sup>87</sup> Barata, Sébastien Martinez, Bernard Dubois, Sarah Levy, and Judith Wielander. *Interiors. Notes and Figures*. Brussels: Editions de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Cellule architecture, 2014, p 17

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p 143

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.



slippages and glitches, excessive and overdone to accustom living patterns around the constraints of awkward partitioning.

In the kitchen, a refrigerator fits perfectly in a small alcove beside the window. But the direct sunlight stresses the refrigerator's cooling system, so a vinyl curtain has been placed over it. Moving into the private recesses of the bedrooms, we see more of these slippages in the assemblage of furniture. A bed has been erected over a Jacuzzi by the installation of a platform. This bedroom had been a large bathroom, originally separated from the adjacent dressing room by a glass brick wall. The glass shower cubicle has been retained in her bedroom. Shelves cluttered with books, storage compartments and ornaments have been placed against it as some form of screening. Today, the dressing room is another bedroom, where numerous shelves, household items and clothes racks attempt to obscure the view through the glass brick wall.



*Figure 2.23 Shelves lined against the glass shower cubicle*



*Figure 2.24 Clutter obscuring view through glass brick wall*

The wooden balustrades that used to partition this loft space over the living room have been replaced by gypsum walls. A piece of cloth with holes hangs as a makeshift skylight shade, as a lack of cross ventilation causes the rooms to heat up too much throughout the day. By need or by impulse, these exemplify spatial alterations through furniture that has obviated the material of walls and the conventions of formal domestic arrangement.

In the landlady's apartment, the sense of estrangement is quite exaggerated. Whereas the modernist creed proclaimed that "Form follows Function", the newly appropriated master bedroom is the antithesis of that. Here, form and function fracture— the original boundaries of the apartment are thwarted and crudely re-articulated by current inhabitation. Privacy and comfort are where each occupant decides to obtain it. The initial modernist gesture of minimal partitioning the apartment becomes instrumental in drawing new occupancy to its vacancy, allowing its ideals to be quelled.

This resonates with Jill Stoner's minor architecture, characterized by the dissolution of the architect's heroic aspirations by the occupant and other subjects that manipulate architecture outside of its physical body.<sup>90</sup> In particular, "the idealized modernist belief of physical determinism is turned on its head, revealing those conditions in which space is the result of action rather than the cause of behavior."<sup>91</sup> Throughout the subdivided apartment, spaces have been conditioned by domestic practices of co-living, encoded by the various desires, intentions and attitudes of the landlady's family and her individual tenants. This collective occupation and spatial reconfiguration are in turn the recent manifestations of economic, social and political forces that have been exerted on the apartment block at the end of its building life cycle. Seen from these traces, the erosion of the physical integrity of the building is in fact indicative of an accumulation and production of cultural information. It is through aging that Pearl Bank has earned merit as one of Singapore's architectural monuments.

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<sup>90</sup> Stoner, Jill. *Toward a Minor Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2012.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p 22

## NOMADS IN AN INTERIORSCAPE

Minor architecture, as seen in Pearl Bank, encodes spaces to recondition them. It is an occurrence that debunks the myth of the diametric interior and exterior, form and function, architect and subject, natural phenomenon and cultural invention.<sup>92</sup> But this is done without the completeness and idealized perfection intended by the major architect. The operation of the minor architect is necessarily ephemeral and driven by lack, and therefore contradictory to Singapore's idea of conservation where adaptive re-use imposes new functions and planned programmes on a renovated building. The conserved architecture is sterilized and frozen in a specific moment in time, as an attempt to salvage it from the doom of aging. However, while physical aging is remedied through the conservation of the object, the reasons by which it should be conserved as a monument are forgotten and often obliterated.

A conservation of Pearl Bank would curb its spontaneous use and reshaping as seen in the apartments as a perennial object of the recent past. Aron Vinegar acknowledges this need to preserve the 'ur-object' that justifies the existence of a monument, to instead protect and see monuments as "ongoing acts of becoming, fabulation, invoking communities to come."<sup>93</sup> As suggested by Caitlyn DeSilvey, perhaps there needs to be an exploration of new methods and ways of storying cultural artefacts and landscapes by "framing histories around movement rather than stasis."<sup>94</sup> The monument exists not only in its physical material, but also as a psychological construct that does not have a permanent and stable symbolic focus. However, conservation in Singapore emphasizes on thorough physical restoration and renewal. The determinacy of these conservation

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<sup>92</sup> Stoner, Jill. *Toward a Minor Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Vinegar, Aron, and Jorge Otero-Pailos. "What a Monument Can Do." *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2011): iii – viii, p iii

<sup>94</sup> DeSilvey, Caitlin. "Making Sense of Transience: An Anticipatory History" 19, no. 1 (2012): 31–54. doi:10.1177/1474474010397599, p 31

methods thus lies in conflict with Pearl Bank's architectural heritage that is also reflected in the ever-changing multiplicity and heterogeneity of its domestic interiorscape.

Visualizing the subdivided Pearl Bank apartment as an interiorscape has involved picking out the exact traces that reveal its condition of ambiguity. Ambiguity arises from the uncertainty of the functional, historical and emotive agency of these spaces, transforming the way in which they are physically presented to us. This materializes the constant oscillation between distinct contrasts of private and public, interior and exterior, past and present, old and new, home and house, clean and contaminated, landlady and tenant. At each of the entries of the apartment, the rooftop garden, the laundry room and the landlady's unit, we are faced with hybrid constructions of walls and doors that are piecemeal, disjointed and eccentric. After entering these spaces, we see objects such as shoes, potted plants and washing machines that mirror status quo domesticity. Yet, more disjunctions persist in walls, floors and staircases as reminders of the apartment's previous iterations beneath layers of modifications and re-appropriations.

The landlady's unit is a culmination of these examples, where furniture defies spatial boundaries. The placement of everyday objects, when studied in relation or opposition to irregularities in physical thresholds, reveals how the production of the domestic interior is perturbed and disrupted as occupants move through it. These temporal movements are further compounded by transient tenancies of co-living. Allusions to previous and current occupancies of various groups converge in these spaces that have been redesigned, reassigned and reprogrammed. As a result, the original intention of the building's architect and his building plan have become increasingly irrelevant to the apartments' current spatial narratives, as well as its current status of monumental importance.

The apartment's interiorscape is carved by the movement of its nomadic occupants. It is decided in the way occupants inscribe living patterns without and over architectural boundaries. Detailing

these finds alternative ways to disseminate De Certeau's thresholds to understand them beyond conventional architectural boundaries that determine and cue spatial conditions. Any dual relationship embedded in the interior and exterior disintegrates, into "degrees of intensity of the interior,"<sup>95</sup> and the conditions of spaces become spectral. Temporality, rather than stasis, associates a series of spaces with the domestic figure:

Old and new nomads, inscribe traces, invisible or real, on the places they cross and where they stop, generating linguistic, cultural and lifestyle contaminations. They remark, delete or reconfigure their identity, absorbing or rejecting differences. By travelling and stopping— temporarily or permanently— they retrace paths followed by others or design new ones.<sup>96</sup>

It is this fleeting quality of the interiorscape that eludes from capture and immobilization. The conservation of Pearl Bank would formulate narratives that prevent the subliminal and imminent transformation of its interiorscape. Rather than retaining its mere physical material, Pearl Bank's accommodation for the future could be protected and secured without deterring atrophic change. It is the observed senescence of building material that recovers and triggers memory. Pearl Bank's effective history is not only the doing of the architect, but its undoing by countless others who have passed through and named it home.

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<sup>95</sup> George Teysot, "A Topology of Thresholds," *Home Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2005): 89–116, p95

<sup>96</sup> Luca Basso Peressut et al., *Nomadic Interiors: Living and Inhabiting in an Age of Migrations*, ed. Giuseppe Marinoni (Milano: SMownPublishing, 2015), p 5

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