

The Public Private Interior: Constructing the Modern Domestic Interior in Singapore's Public Housing

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Privacy And Interiority: Introduction

The house does not have to tell anything to the exterior; instead, all its richness must be manifest in the interior.

—*Adolf Loos*^[1]

"Privacy" is a quality associated with both physical and psychological dimensions and is spatially bound up with the interior, in particular, the domestic interior. The development of domestic privacy as a key spatial concept, in turn, relates to the emergence of the individual subject. "Subjectivity was not simply pictured within the domestic interior; it was here that it *came into being*."^[2] Unsurprisingly, the etymological progression of the word *interior* supports this relationship. Tracing the historical trajectory of what the term *interior* meant, architectural historian Charles Rice points out that as early as the eighteenth century, it not only denoted what was inside but also "designate[d] inner character and a sense of individual subjectivity."^[3] Architecturally, the eighteenth-century house consisted of multipurpose spaces. These spaces gradually gave way to "specialized rooms, corridors, hallways, closets, and back-stairwells" in the nineteenth century.^[4]

The cult of domesticity, and its growing demands for comfort, security, and privacy, was also fully consolidated during this time with the onslaught of consumer culture. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin observes that nineteenth-century modernity "was addicted to dwelling."^[5] Surrounded by furniture, household commodities, and a vast collection of personal bric-a-brac, the occupant cultivated a sense of self accompanied by an obsession with privacy: "to live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric²⁰⁰ about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web.... From this cavern, one does not like to stir."^[6]

Architectural historian Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu argues that privacy goes beyond the oft-made opposition to "enclosure and openness."^[7] Instead, the private realm has always been historically defined in relation to its corollary space, the public domain. In particular, the private domestic interior was established when the spaces of home and work were ideologically separated in terms of geographic distance during the early nineteenth century as offices, factories, workshops, and other sites of economic production were set up outside the family home.^[8] Also, the progressive distinction between male and female spheres came about during this period when men went out to work as the breadwinners of the family while women remained at home to care for the children. Consequently, to

maintain this hierarchy, specific gendered and familial roles in the domestic interior were circumscribed, consolidated, and performed within the specialized rooms of the household, with the husband presiding over the study and the wife in the kitchen. As paid work became more centralized, the domestic interior transformed into a haven for rest and renewal, faraway as it were from the relentless pressures of commerce and trade. The term *domesticity* is inherently more politicized than *home* because it implies a specific type of production, whether biological, material, psychological, social, or even national. Hence, the private domestic realm is a complex space bound up with one or more of these processes.

This chapter revisits the concepts of domestic interiority and privacy in a new context—by exploring their implications and modalities in the modernized island nation of twentieth-century Singapore, a country that has experienced a rapid transformation from a colonial outpost to a third-world city, and eventually to a first-world economic power, all within the short span of four decades. It discusses the construction of privacy within the domestic confines of Singapore's highly successful public housing program by its local housing agency, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), particularly during the agency's first decade, from 1960 to 1970.

The design of the HDB apartment is firmly pragmatic. It aims to provide, within affordable reach, measures of comfort, shelter, hygienic living conditions, and raised standards of living for the majority of the populace. The modular nature of the units facilitates rapid construction (Fig. 26). In fact, the early generations of HDB apartments were relatively spartan in their interior features and were homogeneous throughout in terms of their design. Only recently have there been efforts to personalize the design of these apartments. It is thus amazing to consider how diversity is managed within the interiors of such similar-looking blocks.

As the HDB apartment is unequivocally the most prevalent form of housing in Singapore, experiments and ambitions for its interiors extend beyond the state's interest. This chapter examines how privacy, interiority, and individual subjectivity were invariably shaped by three related factors—state policy, architectural utopianism, and consumer culture—in a common bid to modernize the face of public housing. Compared to the Eurocentric bourgeois historical milieu, which revolved around the individual, what does "privacy" mean in this distinct Asian context of mass housing? What are its boundaries, and how are these boundaries constructed?



Figure 26. Modularized and nondescript facades of the newer HDB point blocks. COURTESY OF LEE LING WEI AND NAJEEB RAHMAT.

The HDB is unique on two counts. First, in contrast to the common perception that privacy is primarily controlled and devised through personal agency, I suggest that the HDB interiors are instead publicly inflected situations with various public bodies having a stake in the makeup of such interiors. Second, while it is also commonly assumed that the state has an investment in public housing, the HDB apartment may be distinguished from this model in that public housing in Singapore is not a provision merely for the economically disprivileged but is home to more than three-quarters of the population. Instead, the state has always been interested precisely in the interior configuration of these apartments as a potent tool for social and familial engineering. With the aid of the apartment's interior layout, the family size and composition and class status were strategically calibrated to meet the state's policy outcomes.

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Notably, the overwhelming success of the HDB program, and its enthusiastic take-up rate by almost 82 percent of Singapore's 3.9 million inhabitants, of whom 70 percent are owner-occupiers, is itself an anomaly since contemporary public housing is often marginalized as second-rate dwellings frequently beset by economic and social problems, such as class inequality, high incidence of crime, and social alienation. In contrast, the occupancy profile of the HDB is wide-ranging and includes "financially-challenged families, solid blue-collar families, and also the upper middle class and young upwardly-mobile professionals."^[9]

While the public face of these blocks has been documented to the point of archival excess in photographs, drawings, reports, and discourse for social, political, historical, or economic purposes, unsurprisingly, knowledge of its interiors has fallen in the gaps of this archive.^[10] There is a need to constantly read between the lines of every official document or image encountered. Despite this phenomenon, the HDB interior's rich life constantly features in contemporary Singaporean literature and film, with the domestic interior being used as a key backdrop for self-critique. These interiorized journeys pick up and describe nuances, details, experiences, and atmospheres, which are often missing from or overlooked in the public archive. As architectural theorist Giuliana Bruno iterates, they allow one to understand the interior as a "haptic space," that is, to be able to have "reciprocal contact" with how spaces are formed through a sense of movement and inhabitation.^[11] This is especially important in understanding the constitution of the private domestic interior given that such spaces are normally not only physically out of bounds but also closed to another's imagination.

To this end, this chapter reads the "hard" evidence projected through official public documents against the more "emotive" descriptions of living within these interiors as narrated in film, poetry, and prose. While my aim is not to analyze these emotive narratives in any detail, the chosen excerpts are intended, as it were, to serve as intimate counterpoints for entering the space of the domestic HDB interior and to act as a counterbalance to the public documents that circumscribe but often skirt around precise descriptions of this interior space.

This unusual negotiation also places a historical, top-down perspective provided by the former evidence alongside contemporary, "lived" views from the latter. While the two voices may be asynchronous, the constancy of the HDB interior across four decades means that such contemporary perspectives allow one to inhabit these spaces as much as

to criticize them. Finally, the negotiation underscores the elusive but persistent atmosphere of domestic privacy within the HDB interiors, which remains in the psyche of so many Singaporeans. As poet Cyril Wong writes, "I wake up in the place where I used to live."^[12]

High-Rise Domesticity: The Hdb And Modernization

Inside four rooms with patterned floors
and toothless furniture, framed photographs
hang undocumented on clean white walls.

—*Jane Pek*^[13]

In Jane Pek's poem "Memory," she associates the HDB interior with her carefree days as a young child living in her grandparents' apartment. For Pek, the interior was clean but basic, with linoleum-covered floors and unremarkable furniture, these being reflective of her grandparents' working-class status. Seeing another elderly woman, Pek remembered what she had quickly forgotten as she grew up and moved out: "It was the HDB life—dirty, arrogant, formidable, marked by stained elevators, bamboo poles of laundry hung out of grilled windows, the buzz and blink of a thousand neon lights and television sets tuned to Channel 8 turned on at night."^[14] While she shared the four rooms with her grandparents, Pek also evokes the collective extent of "HDB life" as "a thousand neon lights" emitted from surrounding households and sounds that filtered unrestricted from one unit to another. The atmosphere she remembers is not rose tinted—the elevators in her grandparents' block are stained with urine and graffiti, while the households are nondescript, with occupants from less privileged backgrounds, as the Chinese-language television channel becomes the only mode of entertainment. In comparison to the obvious cool modern touches of "grey void decks and narrow corridors" on the outside, or the "clean white walls" within the apartment, these spaces are conversely adorned by "the drift and glow of incense [which] strikes the porcelain Buddha on the red altar," or just plain "toothless furniture," and are a site where life is often frugal, with "fish porridge [as] breakfast, lunch, dinner."^[15]

Pek's experience is not unique. Although the HDB apartments today cater to a wide range of occupants, the housing program was created by the Singaporean government in 1960 out of an urgent need to address a severe and mounting lack of proper, modernized housing.^[16] Until then, many residents had lived in cramped, overcrowded, and insalubrious conditions, especially in the central areas, making slums, shacks, and squatter housing rampant. Health conditions in popular districts such as Chinatown were especially appalling as night-working tenants sublet their beds to others during the day, and facilities meant for a single family were serving up to fifteen families.^[17] Other impending factors included a burgeoning population that increased one-and-one-half times between 1947 and 1957 (from 938,144 to 1,445,926) and threats of infectious disease, especially tuberculosis, which was endemic in the congested areas, in addition to widespread homelessness caused by frequent outbreaks of fire in the slums.^[18]

Starting in 1960, 50,000 apartments were built in the first five years, and within a decade of the HDB's inception, the housing shortage was resolved. The program began with the provision of basic rental units for the poor, but a home-ownership scheme was gradually introduced in 1964. To obtain more easily the land needed for mass housing, the colonial Land Acquisition Act was amended in 1966, empowering the government to acquire any land necessary in the interest of national development at a rate of compensation determined by the state, a clause that was arguably in conflict with open-market regulations. In 2009 the World Bank held up Singapore as a model of "effective urbanization" given its success in transforming its rural slums to become "one of the cleanest and most welcoming cities in the world" in under 40 years.^[19] Another strong motivation for the state to house the poor was that it was believed that eventual mass property ownership would encourage personal stakeholderism and individual commitment to raising the nation's social and economic standards.^[20] Hence, a roof over one's head was implicitly tied to the country's larger ambition for economic survival.

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Although the Singaporean skyline is now replete with rectilinear high-density HDB blocks, the vast majority of which were modeled in a recognizably modernist architectural language, high-rise living was adopted out of pragmatism and necessity. The first-generation residents of these apartments had originally dwelled in more communal, village-like neighborhood configurations called *kampong* (Malay for "village").^[21] In such instances, social, familial, and gender norms were established around an informal and organic layout of makeshift *attap* houses, which individually, or as a whole community, could change to meet the growing demands of the households occupying the neighborhood. The concept of privacy in such cases was ambiguous since the private boundaries of one's home were fluid and easily extendable to include communal zones such as the front veranda and the wet kitchen at the rear of the house, which were both often open to the entire community as part of the *kampong's* social network of spaces.

In this sense, the emergence of the compact and relatively sequestered HDB unit, which inevitably prioritized the nuclear family as its main occupants, echoed the architectural privatization of the bourgeois interior in its insistence on elected seclusion and newfound privacy. The first apartments in the township of Toa Payoh were small two-room rental units that had the most basic spaces for sleeping, living-dining, and washing. All other activities were to be undertaken elsewhere. For example, the elderly would gather in the shared space on the ground floor called the "void deck," children would play on the playgrounds or in the corridors, and laundry would be hung out to dry outside the unit, just within reach of the kitchen. Each apartment was accessed through a communal corridor, which usually ran the entire length of the block. The later designs catered for the ideal family size, comprising a husband, wife, and two children, as the unit size was expanded to include a second bedroom.

Yet if the bourgeois interior grew out of a singular obsession with individuated subjectivity, the concept of privacy in the HDB interior was motivated by a combination of factors and agencies desiring technological, economic, and aesthetic modernization in the trying context of 1960s Singapore. I argue that the domestic interior of the HDB apartment, in terms of its unit size and layout, its idealized furnishings, and the spatial relationship between the private unit and its shared communal spaces, all evolved in tandem with the

modernizing ambitions particular to a small and tightly governed postcolonial country. During this period, the populace's and state's collective desires for modernization had divergent objectives—the former yearning for privacy and individuality, while the latter was intent of nurturing the HDB as a nucleus for procreative families. These sentiments were in no small part influenced by Singapore's physical lack of resources as well as its ethnic difference from its Southeast Asian base, a region with abundant natural resources and a large ethnic Muslim population, particularly in the neighboring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. In contrast, Singapore's diminutive size, lack of a hinterland, and large migrant diasporic Chinese population—who have influenced a "Confucian modernity" marked by simultaneous allegiance to modernization and capitalist culture, as well as observance of tradition—set it apart from its neighbors.^[22]

Before we enter a discussion into the various motivations for modernization and their impact on the HDB interior, the significance of modernization in the Singaporean context needs further reiteration. Despite strident criticism from architects like Rem Koolhaas that Singapore's modernization program—physically manifested in its pervasive HDB blocks—is ultimately a "modernity stripped of ideology," cultural theorist C.J.W.-L. Wee argues that the "Singapore modern" is in fact "an instance of the global West inside the national"; that is to say, it is not, as Koolhaas suggests, a "bad-faith copy of the West" but rather "a negotiated modernity—as an adaptation of a modernity that was and is globally circulating."^[23] Highlighting that modernization in the 1960s was coterminous with the reception of the global free market and technological advancement through efficient building, upgrading, and relocation, Wee proposes that the state's solutions in its housing program, for example, are also consistent with the "utilitarian pragmatism" practiced by the People's Action Party (PAP) government since independence. In this light, the modernist HDB blocks may be read as part of "efforts at self-invention by the PAP state, drawing upon a British social-democratic model of state intervention."^[24]

Wee's argument allows a different understanding of why modernization was key, particularly with regard to Singapore's sociopolitical and geographic contexts. In turn, this strategic modernization fueled the privatization of the HDB unit as different local agencies attempted to produce particular socioeconomic and political outcomes by controlling how the interior was construed as "private," that is to say, how a private domestic space within was defined in contrast to the public realm without. In each instance of self-invention, privacy was ultimately embedded into modernized ideas of domesticity, where new notions of family, social networks, and aesthetic tastes were seen as instrumental to reconfiguring class and social mobility.

Privacy And Domesticity: Public Strategies In The Private Interior

The body was found by one of the women along our corridor, this woman who goes to work in the morning earlier than everyone else. She always keeps her windows closed and once in a while she would bring a man back to her house. But we don't care what they do. Anyway she was always well dressed, she knew how to wear shoulder pads and stockings and sometimes when I am in the living room I see her passing in front of our house. This is when I tell my grandchildren to hurry up, put on their shoes quickly, why so dirty, just the second day of school, come, don't forget to kiss your grandmother's hand here, study hard.

—*Alfian Sa'at* ^[25]

In Alfian Sa'at's short story, the discovery of an unknown stabbing victim one morning in the common corridor is pivotal in unraveling relationships and dismantling codes of privacy. The nondescript long linear corridor of "polished cold" cement marks an uncertain threshold between public and private space ("our corridor")^[26] and is used by all residents to enter their homes. As controversy sweeps over the block, the narrator reveals her prejudices about the woman, whom she is not acquainted with. The moral conduct of the latter is immediately put into question as we are told that she is likely unmarried, outwardly promiscuous, habitually secretive, and for the narrator, who views shoulder pads and stockings as indicative of a certain class, suspiciously always impeccably attired. For this armchair voyeur, the presence of this woman is as risqué as the dead man. Unable to look into the woman's locked windows, the narrator eagerly charts her comings and goings on the corridor and speculates about what goes on within her apartment, but at the same time worries about the repercussions of living in close proximity with such a person. The narrator reinforces her domestic beliefs within earshot of her mysterious neighbor by recapitulating how home is meant to anchor the family and nurture children who should in turn reciprocate by working hard and being filial to their elders.

Here, the boundaries of private versus public are amorphous within the threshold condition of the corridor, which acts like an extension of the living room (Fig. 27). More significantly, however, the codes of private space are also legislatively sustained by state policy, which determines what constitutes an idealized family unit in the HDB apartment, who is given the right to stay, and who is not. It has been noted that the public housing program constitutes one of three elements of "control, reform and reward," engineered by the state to harness a "more disciplined and uniform society."^[27] In this sense, the concept of privacy in the HDB context is complicated. It aligns most closely, first, with a sense of ownership and, second, with the ideals of having personal space to operate outside the norm but doing so without upsetting the status quo. Apart from its outward provisions of material security, comfort, spiritual fulfillment, and interiority, privacy in public housing comes with its own proviso. In the home, citizens are instructed on family size, the timing of household formation and childbirth, and the language they ought to speak; they are compulsorily required to save a fifth of their income and, since 1996, to financially support their parents in old age.^[28]

Enforced through housing subsidies, architectural layout, and conditions on sales and rentals, otherwise controversial policies and desired attitudes—such as ethnic integration, which ensures a fair racial distribution of occupants in each housing estate; normalized pro-family structures premised on heterosexual marriage partners intent on procreative coupling; filial piety toward parents, who form the extended family and are privately cared for; and even the influence of personal tastes and acceptable public conduct—constitute ongoing programs that are rarely contested. Housing allocation also shifted with the state's population policy. In 1973, in a bid to engineer small families, for couples that included a female work-permit holder married to a Singaporean, one of the spouses had to agree to "sterilization after the birth of the second child or lose government housing subsidies and other concessions."^[29] In 1993, 19.5 percent of married children lived with their parents, while 45.2 percent lived near their parents, thus "endorsing the state's constructions of the 'normal' family as the fundamental unit of society."^[30] "Abnormal" households including children born out of wedlock, same-sex partners, or even two siblings living together are still discouraged by stringent sale and rental conditions and deprivation of regular housing grants.



Figure 27. The common corridor as an extension of the living room. COURTESY OF KENNETH KOH.

Public exhibitions, residents' handbooks, and propaganda films were used to extend these policies. In conjunction with the HDB's first major exhibition, held at the Selegie Road/Short Street site in December 1960, a model one-room unit was constructed to educate the public on how to best furnish the apartment. The ensuing publicity

photograph of this unit shows a father, a mother, and two children seated within the room, watched over by a fifth person, presumably a visitor, located significantly at the outer limits of the same space. Here, the size of the nuclear family squares with the state's population-control policy; perhaps not coincidentally, this photograph follows on from ²⁰⁸ a highly successful three-month family-planning campaign that was organized in the same year as part of the government's mass Health Education Programme.^[31] While the construction of the HDB was not explicitly linked to population-control policies, studies have suggested that the change from single-person households and extended families to nuclear families was also accelerated by the public housing program.^[32] In another instance, the state-sponsored handbook titled *New Lives in New Homes* espouses the benefits of the nuclear-family unit, suggesting that it will enable the family to enjoy closer ties, cultivate a greater sense of responsibility in the husband, and relieve young couples from the frustration of dealing with the older generation and the burden of extended relatives.^[33] In *Berita Singapura: Housing Week*, a commemorative propaganda film made in 1967 to mark the early success of the public housing program, one scene shows a family of three—a husband, a wife, and their teenage daughter—relaxing in a living room decked out with modern amenities such as a television and a turntable that the daughter is busying herself with.^[34] In case we perceive this idyllic setting as unique to this family, we are then presented with another scene in which another couple looks out of their new apartment's windows to find an exterior view of multiple identical-looking units facing them. In *Housing Week*, the benefits of these interiors' standardization and modernization are emphasized. It implicitly suggests that such consistency offers equal opportunity to the occupants to make a new life for themselves. Thus, the modernized interior—here, the room "in the sky" with the latest technological equipment, far superior to the cramped and unhygienic slum housing of recent memory—is also a model room and a public image that must be maintained.

In tandem with these ideological restrictions, the early interiors may be read as also encouraging familial groupings in their architectural layout. The toilet and shower room, for instance, were installed as two separate spaces, accessible only through the kitchen (Fig. 28). This meant that the two most private spaces, one for sleeping and sexuality and the other for cleansing, were detached and connected only through two more public rooms—the living and kitchen-dining spaces (Fig. 29). Although the grouping of the toilet and shower room was primarily for convenience of plumbing, the detachment of the latter from the bedrooms meant that traffic between these private spaces was completely open to public scrutiny. To a certain extent, this layout privileges the legitimate intimacy between nuclear-family members, as opposed to more transient and furtive relationships between/with strangers or lovers. With the "neat bourgeoisie hierarchy of privacy ... disturbed," these intermediate spaces that accommodated "proper, speakable activities" such as socializing and eating also indirectly dissuaded the traffic of publicly unsanctioned relationships between the two private realms.^[35]

As the narrator in Sa'at's short story attests through her disdain for the single promiscuous neighbor, the legislative policies and architectural layout work together to designate the constitution of the proper private domestic realm. They describe which desired bodies are to be housed in these apartments—those of heterosexual married couples, preferably with children. Here, too, the concept of privacy is inherently linked to sexuality, albeit

sexuality that conforms and is procreative rather than wastefully excessive. The construction of privacy through the domestic family unit requires a disciplining of the occupant's body. The interior, and also the common spaces linking all interiors, such as the corridor, is devised so that what is improper will be exposed or expunged. In this way, the HDB unit and its immediate environment mirror a system of surveillance that ultimately spatializes the "social institution of marriage" and maintains this institution through incentivized reproduction.^[36] As architectural historian and theorist Mark Wigley argues, "the boundaries that define the house" need to be critiqued.^[37] Similarly, in the HDB, beyond the actual physical space, it is state public ideology that delineates these boundaries and predetermines what is deemed private, insular, sacrosanct, and protected.



Figure 28. Shower room and toilet within the kitchen area (right side). COURTESY OF SAN TZER NING JEREMY.



Figure 29. View from the living room toward the kitchen. COURTESY OF SAN TZER NING JEREMY.

Yet it would be too simplistic to assume that the construction of privacy was just limited to state efforts. Other interest groups such as the local architecture community also had a hand in this modernized utopian dream. On at least two occasions, first in 1960 and then again in 1961, members of the Singapore Polytechnic Architectural Society (SPAS), consisting of architecture students, designed, constructed, and displayed interior solutions for clean, modern, and compact living.^[38] Using the HDB public exhibitions as their platform, SPAS's solutions were distinctive in that they challenged the homely interiors normally projected by the state and the mass media. In an HDB exhibition held in 1961 at Macpherson Road, the society used the typical compare-and-contrast method to educate the public. Two two-room apartments were decorated in opposing styles—apartment 55 in "the usual unsanitary and haphazard manner—furnishing it with the typical beds, chairs, cupboards, etc. So realistic did it appear that for a moment it was easily mistaken for an actual dwelling." In contrast, apartment 56 used no conventional furniture, settling instead for multipurpose platforms and low-cost storage systems that presented a solution so "radical and rational" that it "discard[ed] the normal sentiments of furnishing."^[39] The furnishings in apartment 56 were remarkably constructed for under SGD\$300. The society promised that this "revolutionary" condition would allow eight persons to live comfortably together in a space free of clutter and excess. This unusual brief was undertaken by the SPAS to address the public's "misuse" of the two-room unit, and they purposefully overloaded the space with twice the number of occupants it was originally designed for, possibly to critique the state's idealized standards of occupation.

The proposed solution closely resembles a modernized machine for minimal living such that the conventionally separate functions of sleeping, working, eating, and entertaining could be adaptively accommodated in a limited space. Open-plan communal living in this case also meant that the idea of privacy was transformed to resemble something more akin to village or *kampong* groupings, where an extended family could comfortably reside in close proximity. The individual interior components were also conceived to be either easily constructed or found objects such as milk boxes, which could be creatively reused. This notion of self-help was meant to foster a sense of individual sufficiency, as well as the ability to create something unique for one's own home.

A cutaway axonometric drawing neatly divides the original living and bedroom spaces into nongeneric functional zones for activity and storage. Again, the hierarchies that accompany privacy are immediately dismantled as defined boundaries between private and public are erased. While this configuration apparently contradicts the state's plan for the nuclear family, it in fact reiterates the point that if a larger household is to be accommodated in the same space, then drastic measures must be taken to preserve the original public image of these interiors, whose main purpose is to propagate a healthy²¹¹ and hygienic environment conducive to a "stable and prosperous nation."^[40] SPAS's minimal living solution has another distinction. As emphasized in the 1960 HDB *Annual Report*, where the society's model one-room unit is documented, the model interior was meant to "give a variety of ideas and suggestions on how to furnish [the] flats."^[41] As such, the model HDB interior was also a conduit through which specific notions of class and taste, as reflected in the occupants' household furnishings, could be publicly cultivated and/or altered.

From 1972 to 1989, the HDB published and freely circulated to every HDB home its bimonthly magazine, *Our Home*.^[42] The highlight of this magazine would invariably be a feature on an exemplary interior, almost always self-furnished by a keen do-it-yourself occupant who had an amateur interest in design. The interiors ranged from the typical white modernist ones to those that had a more exotic flair, for example, those combining Victorian (chandeliers, damask curtains, and huge armchairs) and oriental (carved wooden statues, ancient vases, antique Chinese porcelain) styles. Giving instructive taste advice on proper ornamentation, correct use of color, and avoidance of clutter, among other things, the articles are, as Jane Jacobs and Stephen Cairns argue, evidence of "micropolitics of state, subjectivity and built form."^[43] Through the model homes featured in this magazine, the "Singaporean interior" was at once governed, "cultivated and contained" so that "the economic investments it entailed did not become excessive."^[44] The leading local broadsheet, *The Straits Times*, similarly ran a section every weekend dedicated to home decoration. Occasionally, specific articles would be directed at HDB dwellers, suggesting budget-friendly but "tasteful" additions to the home. Toward the end of the 1960s, as increasingly larger numbers of residents also became home owners, the instructive articles veered toward advocating a more individual style in each home by the incorporation of elements from both familiar and foreign cultures. For example, in a 1967 piece that explores the range of wallpaper designs available on the market, the writer attests, "An oriental effect is given to a bedroom with Chinese interior décor ... by the wallpapering of 'Linden Bower' in cherry blossom design."^[45]

Yet the meshing of global and local references, and the preference for all things exotic, may be seen as a strategic move toward self-invention, and thus completely consistent with modernizing ambitions: "the alterity of Singapore's modernism lies firmly in its willingness to accommodate the very type of ornamented and phantasmagorical interior styling with which its European predecessor could not live."^[46] Instead of interpreting the borrowing and assimilation of exotic Western aesthetics in the Asian context as derivative, cultural theorist Abidin Kusno similarly argues that "'Westernization' ... may suggest ... a destination, a process of arrival, by replication at some imagined place called 'the West'. But seen from the other [non-Western] side of the globe ... [it] could also point to a departure, an exit from something one wants to leave behind, which does not necessarily imply that one would then arrive at, or replicate, a particular place called 'the West.'"^[47] Thus, the construction of the private realm through phantasmagoric effects of borrowed places and times was dictated not only by popular fashion but also by the urge to reinvent the self anew (Plate 11).

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Conclusion

Wife: In Beijing, you told me the place you live in was very special; I thought it was a villa. Actually all the Singaporeans live in similar homes: Government flats.

Husband: What's wrong with HDB flats? At least it's more sanitary than where you used to stay.

Wife: ... the first country in the world to install urine detectors in elevators to catch people peeing.

Husband: But look, after they installed the urine detectors, they were so effective, nobody pees in the elevators anymore.

Wife: Yes, because they now pee in the corridors!^[48]

In the film *12 Storeys*, a China-born bride chastises her Singapore-born husband for going back on his promise of a comfortable and luxurious home. The excerpt above also intimates the fragility of privacy at the cusp of the domestic realm as surveillance technology is employed to make public, and thus control, delinquency. As a consequence, the absolute boundaries between the separate spheres of public and private are fundamentally unstable as public doctrines gradually make their way into the private domestic interior.

The modern private domestic realm is an intricate construction and, as shown, often not limited to the efforts of the individual occupant. It is instead produced "by way of a complex dialogue between the modernisms evident on drawing boards, those articulated in political rhetoric, those modelled in displays or captured in magazines, those constructed by bureaucracy, and those aspired to by residents."^[49] The HDB interior is exemplary of how public values and expressions may fundamentally alter and shape the private domestic realm. More important, the constitution and construction of this private interior were seen as key to the implementation of government policies involving population control and state productivity and, more indirectly, the transformation of class status through informed notions of taste and aesthetics.

If the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie's private domestic interior could be read as an accurate summation of the individual's identity and subjectivity, then the twentieth-century Asian/Singaporean domestic interior proves to be a little more complicated. Here, the interior is produced through the subtle processes of mediation, control, negotiation, and self-invention. And, reciprocally, this interior may also obfuscate the self, which remains fragmented and enigmatic even in a person's own private domestic space.

Notes

[1] Adolf Loos, "Heimat Kunst," in *Adolf Loos: Trotzdem 1900–1930* (1931; Vienna: Georg Prachner, 1982).

[2] Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 20.

[3] Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

[4] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 10.

[5] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 220.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 216.

[7] Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu, "Thresholds of Privacy and the Ideal(ized) Home," *Singapore Architect*, special issue on housing, no. 189 (1995): p. 27.

[8] For a history of the separation of home and workspaces see, for example, Dona Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence Zuniga, eds., *HouseLife. Space, Place and Family in Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); and Hilde Heynen, "Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar, 1–29 (London: Routledge, 2005).

[9] Robbie Goh, "Things to a Void," in *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents, and Interpretive Experiences*, ed. Robbie Goh and Brenda Yeoh (Singapore: World Scientific, 2003), p. 64.

[10] The single most comprehensive academic paper written on the HDB interior so far is by Jane Jacobs and Stephen Cairns, on the decoration of households as traced through the HDB newsletter *Our Home*. From conversation with the authors, it is apparent that there is a dearth of public information on how the interior is lived. See Jane M. Jacobs and Stephen Cairns, "The Modern Touch: Interior Design and Modernization of Post-independence Singapore," *Environment and Planning A* 40 (2008): pp. 572–95.

[11] Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 6.

[12] Cyril Wong, "First House," in *Unmarked Treasure* (Singapore: Firstfruits, 2004), p. 11.

[13] Jane Pek, "Memory," in *No Other City: The Ethos of Urban Poetry*, ed. Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2000), p. 172.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 172–73.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] For a comprehensive history of the early years of the HDB, its objectives and output, see *First Decade in Public Housing, 1960–1969* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1970); A. K. Wong and S.H.K. Yeh, eds., *Housing a Nation: Twenty-five Years of Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1985), and Beng Huat Chua, "Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore," in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser, 307–27 (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997).

[17] *Report on New Life in New Homes* (Singapore: Persatuan Wanita Singapura, 1965), p. 18.

[18] In 1961, 2,642 families were made homeless because of six fires; in 1962, 81 families suffered a similar fate as nine fires destroyed the slum areas. See *Annual Report of the Housing and Development Board* (Singapore, 1961), p. 53; and *Annual Report of the Housing and Development Board* (Singapore, 1962), p. 51.

[19] "Our History: Development," <http://app.www.sg/who/40/Development.aspx>, accessed June 20, 2011.

[20] Chua, "Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful," p. 315.

[21] Sishir Chang, "A High-Rise Vernacular in Singapore's Housing Development Board Housing," *Berkeley Planning Journal* 14 (2000): pp. 97–116.

[22] C. J. Wan-Ling Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007), p. 22.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 85, 86. The People's Action Party has been in power and almost unopposed since Singapore's independence.

[25] Alfian Sa'at, "Corridor," in *Corridor: 12 Short Stories* (Singapore: Raffles, 1999), p. 41.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[27] Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), p. 11. The other two elements of control are a network of "parapolitical" community-based, grassroots institutions linked to the state and a series of public campaigns and programs designed to alter behavior such as productivity, public hygiene, courtesy, family planning, energy use, moral values, and use of Mandarin. From 1968 to 1982, sixty-six campaigns were launched.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[29] Ching Ling Tai, *Housing Policy and High-Rise Living: A Study of Singapore's Public Housing* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1988), p. 114.

[30] Perry, Kong, and Yeoh, *Singapore*, p. 115.

[31] As early as 1959, the People's Action Party government recognized unchecked population growth as an obstacle to economic development and the potential cause of serious social, political, and economic problems.

[32] Peter S. J. Chen and James T. Fawcett, *Public Policy and Population Change in Singapore* (New York: Population Council, 1979). During the period 1957–1970, the proportion of one-family-nucleus households increased from around 64 to 72 percent, whereas the combined no-family-nucleus and single-person households dropped from 26 to 17 percent. The estimated proportion of nuclear-family households increased from 51 percent in 1957 to 57 percent in 1970.

[33] *Report on New Life*, p. 42.

[34] *Berita Singapura: Housing Week*, videocassette, Singapore National Archive, accession number 2004001774 (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, Broadcasting Division, 1967).

[35] Baydar Nalbantonglu, *Singapore Architect*, p. 28.

[36] Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 336 and 339.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 331.

[38] See model of one-room unit furnished with low-cost furniture in *Annual Report of the Housing and Development Board 1960* (Singapore: Housing Development Board, 1960), p. 45; and "The Winning Set of Furniture at the Housing and Development Board Exhibition of Low-Cost Furniture at Macpherson Road on August 12–20, 1961, submitted by S.P.A.S.," *Dimension Annual: Journal of the Singapore Polytechnic Architectural Society* 1 (1962): pp. 32–34.

[39] "Winning Set of Furniture," p. 33.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Annual Report* (1960), p. 44.

[42] The circulation of this magazine was 161,000 in 1973, and this number grew to 440,000 by 1989.

[43] Jacobs and Cairns, "The Modern Touch," p. 592.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] "Wallpaper of New Design to Give an Illusion of Depth and Calm Beauty," *The Straits Times* August 30, 1967, p. 10.

[46] Jacobs and Cairns, "Modern Touch," p. 592.

[47] Abidin Kusno, *Beyond the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 204.

[48] Excerpt from *12 Storeys*, dir. Eric Khoo (Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 1997).

[49] Jacobs and Cairns, "Modern Touch," p. 591.