

WRITING ARCHITECTURE
The Lived Experience of an Emerald Hill House

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Architecture

In

The Department of Architecture
School of Design and Environment
National University of Singapore

For

AR5141 Dissertation
M.Arch, Semester 1, 2009/10

11 September 2009

ABSTRACT

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In architectural journals, books and magazines, the prevailing mode of textual representation focuses primarily on the sum or parts of a typical formula – describing a building, the context of the building, that is, who the architect is, when the building was built, its location, site conditions, etc. What are the limitations of these representations? Is there any other way of representing architecture apart from focusing entirely on its built form? As other representative media like drawings and models show the built form, perhaps writing should present a more complex spatial experience of the building. How then is this spatial experience expressed? This dissertation aims to look at how a more evocative spatial experience can be depicted in the writing of architecture.

It develops arguments made by Pierre-Alain Croset on the importance of the narrative mode and how this mode may supplement the image in architectural publications. This dissertation proposes that texts become representative of ‘accidental architecture’—where the agenda is not architectural in particular, but still manages to evoke spatial experiences. Studying various narrative modes used by Katja Grillner and Karen Bermann, this dissertation aims to reveal how architectural spaces are evoked using alternative techniques of textual representation. Taking Emerald Hill Road as a site of study, I will explore social, cultural, historical and fictional accounts of Peranakans and the houses they lived in. Known for their meticulous approach to detail from cooking and sewing, to traditional rites and rituals, this dissertation will attempt to draw from the studied accounts, a method of representing a richer experience of space.

Architecture can be represented not by its own merit (and these are readily accessible in photographs), but also by the value it has gained through its users. For example, houses of writers and poets like Sylvia Plath, William Wordsworth, and William Shakespeare have gained their value because of the very presence of these occupants.

As viewers inspect Wordsworth's kitchen, the location of the pots and fireplace may attract added interest because visitors want to know *how* the poet and his family lived. Likewise, though the dissertation is not studying houses of famous people, the importance of the 'lived detail' and the bodily occupation of its users can be translated to a closer reading of space. The 'lived detail' encompasses an occupant's traces of dwelling, and is not so much a critique on his tastes and habits. All these form components of 'accidental architecture', that is, representations of architecture without a deliberate attempt to do so.

From this, the dissertation will propose an alternative way to 'write architecture' through a narration of the 'accidental architecture' mentioned above.

For C.E.

with love

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I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

But when his mistress for the time being was a woman in society, or at least one whose birth was not so lowly, nor her position so irregular that he was unable to arrange for her reception in 'society,' then for her sake he would return to it, but only to the particular orbit in which she moved or into which he had drawn her. "No good depending on Swann for this evening," people would say, "don't you remember, it's his American's night at the Opera?" He would secure invitations for her to the most exclusive drawing-rooms, to those houses where he himself went regularly, for weekly dinners or for poker, every evening, after a slight wave imparted to his stiffly brushed red locks had tempered with a certain softness the ardour of his bold green eyes, he would select a flower for his buttonhole and set out to meet his mistress at the house of one or other of the women of his circle; and then, thinking of the affection and admiration which the fashionable folk, whom he always treated exactly as he pleased, would, when he met them there, lavish upon him in the presence of the woman whom he loved, he would find a fresh charm in that worldly existence of which he had grown weary, but whose substance, pervaded and warmly coloured by the flickering light which he had slipped into its midst, seemed to him beautiful and rare, now that he had incorporated in it a fresh love.

A thousand trifling little details—the charming prodigality of the chemist—details which would have been eliminated from an artificial preparation, gave me, like a book in which one is astonished to read the name of a person whom one knows, the pleasure of finding that these were indeed real lime-blossoms, like those I had seen, when coming from the train, in the Avenue de la Gare, altered, but only because they were not imitations but the very same blossoms, which had grown old. And as each new character is merely a metamorphosis from something older, in these little grey balls I recognised green buds plucked before their time; but beyond all else the rosy, moony, tender glow which lit up the blossoms among the frail forest of stems from which they hung like little golden roses—marking, as the radiance upon an old wall still marks the place of a vanished fresco, the difference between those parts of the tree which had and those which had not been 'in bloom'—shewed me that these were petals which, before their flowering-time, the chemist's package had embalmed on warm evenings of spring. That rosy candlelight was still their colour, but half-extinguished and deadened in the diminished life which was now theirs, and which may be called the twilight of a flower. Presently my aunt was able to dip in the boiling infusion, in which she would relish the savour of dead or faded blossom, a little madeleine, of which she would hold out a piece to me when it was sufficiently soft.

Meantime, let me ask myself one question -- Which is better? -- To have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort -- no struggle; -- but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on the flowers covering it; wakened in a southern clime, amongst the luxuries of a pleasure villa; to have been now living in France, Mr. Rochester's mistress; delicious with his love half my time -- for he would -- oh, yes, he would have loved me well for a while. He DID love me -- no one will ever love me so again. I shall never more know the sweet homage given to beauty, youth, and grace -- for never to any one else shall I seem to possess these charms. He was fond and proud of me -- it is what no man besides will ever be. -- But where am I wandering, and what am I saying, and above all, feeling? Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles -- suffocating with delusive bliss one hour -- remorse and shame the next -- or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest -- blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character -- perfect concord is the result.

Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union; perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near -- that knit us so very close; for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature -- he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam -- of the landscape before us; of the weather round us -- and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go; of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad -- because he claimed these services without painful shame or dampening humiliation. He loved me so truly, that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance: he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes.

I looked at him secretly from under fall of hair He was lying on his back, his hands under his head, staring at the ceiling. The starched white sleeves of his shirt, rooled up to the elbows, glimmered eerily in the half dark and his tan skin seemed almost black. I thought he must be the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. And then I wondered if as soon as he came to love me I would find fault after fault, the way I did with Buddy Willard and the boys before him. The same thing happened over and over. I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

And soon, mechanically, oppressed by the gloomy day and the prospect of another sad day to follow, I carried to my lips a spoonful of tea in which I had let soften a bit of madeleine. But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening inside me. A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion to its cause. It had immediately rendered the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, acting in the same way that love acts, by filling me with a precious essence: or rather this essence was not merely inside me, it was me.¹

Reading Marcel Proust's famous passage on the madeleine, I wanted to have a madeleine too. I was convinced that having a madeleine would make me feel 'delicious pleasure' and render unimportant all the 'vicissitudes of [my own] life.' The draw of fiction lies in its cathartic ability both for the reader and the writer. In a poem explaining why she spent her life writing, Sylvia Plath concluded by saying that 'I write only because / There is a voice within me / That will not be still.'² Speaking for the reader, Haruki Murakami's 'Kafka on the Shore' depicts a troubled teenage runaway who loves books and spends his days 'devouring books' in a small-town library.³ Latching on to these ideas, this dissertation aims to critique the prevailing mode of textual architectural representation and to propose a writing format that evokes the reader in a similar way.

Writing on the importance of spatial experience, Pierre-Alain Croset argues that architectural works in any publication are 'represented by only a few reproducible

¹ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Books), p.45.

² Sylvia Plath, quoted in Aurelia Schoeber Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p.34-5.

³ Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Vintage 2005), p.9.

images' and this cancels out 'a fundamental dimension of architecture: its temporal experience, which by definition is *not reproducible*.'⁴ He quotes Le Corbusier:

Arab architecture teaches us a precious lesson. It is best appreciated *walking*, on foot. It is when walking, when moving, that one sees the ordering principles of the architecture unfold.⁵

The architectural narrative, as Pierre Alain-Croset expands, is important because it can evoke a 'temporal experience' of a place, and is the 'only technique that can represent a built architecture in all its dimensions.'⁶ Architecture, in essence, is best understood by physically experiencing it. In light of one's inability to visit just any architectural site they desire, narrative becomes an important tool in bridging that gap. Current architectural texts in books or magazines, however, lack a depiction of that temporal, or even *spatial* experience. How then does one represent a layered spatial experience? And *whose* experience are we representing?

In Joan W. Scott's article, 'The Evidence of Experience', she rhetorically asks, 'what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?'⁷ Similar to the arbitrariness of individuals' opinions, this 'experience' is bounded by subjectivity. The experience of a subject is very dependent on what he/she sees. Furthermore, his or her experience is influenced by a large variety of factors, such as social and cultural backgrounds, personal experiences and most intangibly, by individual thought. As Scott further explains, this 'kind of appeal to [a subject's] experience as uncontested evidence' is the very factor that 'weakens the critical thrust of [architectural texts].'⁸ The point to this is perhaps to transcend an attempt to narrate as objective an experience of space as possible. Through explorations of narrative form and content, this experience of space could start from the way a text is presented to the reader so as to allow them the opportunity to form an

⁴ Pierre-Alain Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', in *Architectureproduction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), p. 201.

⁵ Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complète de 1929-1934*, 5th ed. (Zurich: Girsberger, 1952), p.24.

⁶ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.203.

⁷ Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (eds.), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.367.

⁸ Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', p.367.

experience of their own. The text could be more evocative than images alone because it involves or activates the imagination. Texts could point to past experiences and memories, igniting one's imagination and allowing one to form a vivid reading of the space described.

Taking into account the role that the imagination plays in spatial experiences, I take as my subject matter the residential estate of Emerald Hill Road. This area is intriguing because it is a quiet neighbourhood just steps away from the main circulation corridor of Singapore's shopping district, Orchard Road. Previously home to a large number of Chinese Peranakans, Emerald Hill has been depicted in various media – amongst these, stories, architectural accounts, tourist brochures, and cultural histories. These media representations have different agendas. Tourist brochures and fictional narratives romanticise stories and histories of the place to heighten its allure; cultural histories capture as much detail of past lives, rituals and traditions in order to give as accurate an account as possible of the past dwellers, and architectural accounts attempt to depict a spatial reading of the houses. Through these various modes of writing, different images of Emerald Hill are represented. However, I am suggesting that it is perhaps inadequate to represent these modes independently. Just as cultural histories include descriptions of past architecture, so could architectural accounts include more than one representational mode in order to present a more complex reading of the space.

While Emerald Hill as a domestic space is not fully representative of architectural space in general, it is used in this dissertation as a proposed point of departure from which spaces can be read. Domestic spaces are different from public spaces in that public spaces are readily accessible and are not *lived* in. Therefore, the domestic realm is used to provide a more focused study on the use and occupancy of spaces. Through this, the dissertation will explore ways in which the close relationship between users and their dwellings can lead to an understanding of the spaces occupied.

As Scott expands, ‘writing is reproduction, transmission – the communication of knowledge through (visual, visceral) experience.’⁹ This effectiveness of this ‘communication’ lies in the hands of the writer, who may also have physically visited the site. The writer must then find a way first to capture the reader’s attention, and subsequently reward this reader by depicting a vivid and evocative account of the space in question.

Critiquing the structure of existing texts on the domestic spaces of Emerald Hill, this dissertation examines other ways in which architecture can be depicted; that is, through what I call ‘accidental architecture’. Accidental architecture is architecture unintended – meaning that its production does not necessarily have an architectural origin. This dissertation proposes that accidental architecture may comprise of a few modes of writing – the ‘lived detail’, the bodily occupation of architecture and fictional representations of architecture.

The lived detail refers to objects found in one’s house and is the first indicator of an occupant’s presence, tastes and preferences. Latching onto the lived detail, the bodily occupation of the user also evokes spatial qualities in a text. Charlotte Bronte’s description of the red room in *Jane Eyre* brings to mind a gloomy, oppressive space through a narration of Jane’s frail little body in a chilly room with heavy crimson drapes and blinds that are always drawn. This thus effectively depicts the emptiness and soullessness in a room of imprisonment. The draw of fiction is depicted in Proust’s intricate details describing his moments of immense solitude in his bedroom at his grandparent’s Combray house, bringing forth a compelling image of the protagonist’s occupied space.¹⁰

Also, studying Baron Haussmann’s Paris in my third year of study, I was fascinated by the description of the Opera Garnier; history had never been portrayed so vividly and invitingly before. In playing up to society’s ‘pleasure in assuming roles and savouring spectacles’, Barry Bergdoll describes Garnier’s opera house with

⁹ Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, p.366.

¹⁰ Proust, *Swann’s Way*, pp.4-7.

overwhelming detail.¹¹ The description of the mirrors on the columns that ‘exploited the flicker of the gas light as the first of the dazzling effects the art of architecture’ are followed immediately by narrations of how the ‘auditorium seems to have been made for the staircase rather than the staircase for the auditorium.’¹² Immediately after highlighting the grandeur of the auditorium and its magnificent staircase, Bergdoll gives the reader almost no time to catch his breath, somewhat downplaying his previous dazzling description by writing that ‘the auditorium seemed an *anticlimax* after the rich colours of an array of marbles and the layering of space.’¹³ Though I could vividly imagine what a spectacular sight it was, I wanted to see everything for myself; the mirrored columns, the gilded walls, the marble caryatids, the grand staircase. Bergdoll hardly enumerates the number of columns, the actual positions of windows, or the height of the ceiling, yet the reader still derives a rich, if not richer, spatial experience.

Taking the cue from Bergdoll’s descriptions, a link can be drawn to the narration of architectural texts. Looking at non-architectural texts on the subject matter, this dissertation examines the role that accidental architecture plays in narrating an architectural experience.¹⁴ Developing from accidental architecture, this dissertation examines in what other ways architecture may be conveyed beyond a representation of its built form.

The detail as architects and builders know it has always bordered on the *construction detail*, a set of measured drawings conveying the architect’s intentions to the builder. It is such an important and ubiquitous means of communication that it has almost become synonymous with the *architectural detail*, as illustrated in Clare Cardinal-Pett’s essay on ‘Detailing’ where she uses the words ‘architectural’ and ‘construction’ interchangeably to describe the latter. Going back to the link between users and their spaces, this dissertation proposes that the architectural detail comprises of at least two subjects – the scaled construction drawings that communicate the design intent, and

¹¹ Barry Bergdoll, ‘The City Transformed, 1848-90’, *European Architecture 1750-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.253.

¹² Bergdoll, ‘The City Transformed’, p.255.

¹³ Bergdoll, ‘The City Transformed’, p.255. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ Cultural, biographical and historical accounts of Peranakan houses will be explored in *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* and *The Straits Chinese House*, while fictional accounts of Emerald Hill Road will be explored in *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Nan-mei-su Girls of Emerald Hill*.

the ‘lived detail’. This lived detail bears a closer relationship to the space’s occupants, and the traces that they leave behind. Spaces become more tangible and relational when readers can *imagine* how someone has used it before, enabling them to draw from their own knowledge and memories of how they themselves experience architecture.

As introduced above, spaces gain additional layers of meaning and intrigue through usage and occupancy. After all, before any representational modes of architecture came about, the ‘audience of architecture was the user’, where the understanding of a space was derived from physically experiencing it for oneself.¹⁵ Therefore while the architect’s idealised usage of his designed space somewhat dominates, the users inevitably determine how it is occupied. As Lilian Chee explains, houses are interesting because of how we ‘set out to change them with our ordered routines, eccentricities and possessions, and how in turn, with time, we inevitably become inextricable from the houses we live in.’¹⁶ In essence, an inextricable link exists between spaces and their occupants; occupants ‘strive to change’ their spaces, and the spaces, in turn, ‘transform’ their occupants.¹⁷

In critiquing prevailing modes of architectural narratives, Croset argues that he cannot ‘relate what [he] see[s] published with [his] habitual way of *knowing* architecture through direct experience.’¹⁸ Readers, also as users of spaces, can derive a more vivid interpretation if they are able to imagine a possible ‘*life inside the building*’, and this, as Croset states, is not possible through normative architectural texts.¹⁹ Bringing in another aspect of accidental architecture, this dissertation then proposes that the bodily occupation of a space is relevant in giving readers a more layered and relational spatial experience. Readers may draw similarities or differences between themselves and past users, hence bringing about a deeper understanding of the space in question. This dissertation then discusses the various modes of accidental

¹⁵ Beatriz Colomina, ‘Introduction: On Architecture, Production and Reproduction’, in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Architectureproduction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press: 1988), p.9.

¹⁶ Lilian Chee, ‘Domesticity and Monumentality: Performing the Peranakan House, in *Of Fingerbowl and Hankies: Chris Yap Voyeurs through the Peranakan House*, 26 June – 31 December 2009, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2009), p.18.

¹⁷ Chee, ‘Domesticity and Monumentality’, p.18.

¹⁸ Croset, ‘The Narration of Architecture’, p. 204.

¹⁹ Croset, ‘The Narration of Architecture’, p. 204.

architecture through studies of domestic spaces in Emerald Hill Road. Besides the intrigue that Emerald Hill holds, the study of a domestic space is highlighted since the ‘ordered routines, eccentricities and way of life’ inform readers of how spaces are used, appropriated and possessed.

Accidental architecture, as the term suggests, does not have an ‘architectural’ agenda; likewise, the lived detail may be enough to intrigue and invite, but it is hardly able to offer a holistic spatial reading. The detail remains a fragment as long as it is not woven into a coherent narrative. While the bodily occupation of architecture adds another dimension to the reader’s perceived experience of a space, it cannot exist independently or it may result in an abstract depiction akin to the geometrical description of spaces in normative architectural accounts. The proposed method to architectural narration therefore cannot be based only one or the other. It needs to be a sum of parts, where different representational modes feed into each other, providing the evocative, and informative spatial experience that this dissertation advocates.

In the penultimate chapter, an alternative narration of an Emerald Hill Road house is presented. Incorporating a combination of a *lived experience*, fictional and historical details are placed in a parallel narrative alongside a theoretical architectural framework, which guides the reader through the lived detail and the bodily occupation of that space. Through this narrative, the aims of the dissertation are reinforced; that of an architectural text presenting space as something evocative, conveying a *lived experience* instead of abstract descriptions of a built form.

CHAPTER 2: THE NARRATIVE

Importance of the Narrative

Architecture is produced in three different registers, through three different texts: drawing, writing and building. (We could count four, if we consider models.)²⁰

Drawing on Diana Agrest's definitions of architectural production, the subsequent representation of architecture can be depicted through image, text, physical building, and the model. Within the category of the image are two- and three-dimensional drawings and perspectives, as well as photographs. Models are expressed as conceptual or scaled models, while texts can be expressed in several ways, ranging from fictional narratives, to historical accounts, to factual descriptions. This dissertation will focus on the narrative, especially with respect to its depiction in architectural publications.

Yet a magazine can *evoke* the temporal experience using, as a technique, *narration*. This is an extremely old technique, as old as architecture, yet it still possesses enormous power: it is the only technique that can represent a built architecture in all its dimensions, or rather can evoke all the perceptions the body senses inside the building – the light, the resonance of steps and voices, the vertigo, the impression of intimacy, the muscular effort of climbing a stair, the refreshing sensation offered by the marble surface of a hand rail.²¹

Writing on narration architectural publications, Pierre-Alain Croset illustrates the importance of narrative with respect to our understanding of built form. Referring to it

²⁰ Diana Agrest, 'Postscript: Representation as Articulation between Theory and Practice', in Stan Allen (ed.), *Practice: Architecture, Technique, and Representation* (Australia: GB Arts International, 2000), p.164.

²¹ Pierre-Alain Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', in Joan Ockman (ed.), *Architectureproduction* (Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1988), p.203.

as a ‘technique...as old as architecture’, he emphasizes that it is the ‘only technique that can represent architecture in all its dimensions.’ Even more powerful than the image itself, a narrative text is able to ‘give form to a sequence of photographs that refer to the temporal sequence of movement through a building.’²² In this instance, the image perhaps falls short because precisely a ‘picture paints a thousand words.’²³ It leaves no room for imagination since it feeds the viewer with an exact and concrete projection of the object in question, whereas a text or description could take on different meanings for different readers by virtue of their disparate experiences and backgrounds.

The narrative is thus even more powerful than the image because of its ability to invite the reader’s imagination. When we think of a space, we remember what we were doing at that point, what we were looking at, whom we were with, and how we felt. The image points at what physically exists on site, whereas the narrative can be used to conjure various states of emotions, practices and contexts for the reader. As James Donald suggests in his essay ‘Imagining the Modern City’, our:

... imagination is inherently narrative. Space is less the already existing setting for such stories, than the production of space through that *taking place*, through the act of narration.²⁴

Writing, as Donald elaborates, does not only ‘record or reflect the fact of a [space]. It has its role in producing the [space] for a reading public’.²⁵ Likewise, the role that writing plays is not only that of depicting architectural facts – it needs to re-create and re-produce a space for the reader. Through this re-creation and re-production of a space, the description becomes alive in our mind’s eye. It is this imagination that the image is unable to sufficiently evoke.

²² Croset, ‘The Narration of Architecture’, p.208.

²³ The origins of this phrase is unclear, though it is widely attributed to Frederick R. Barnard, who published a piece commending the effectiveness of graphics in advertising with the title ‘One look is worth a thousand words’, in *Printer’s Ink*, December 1921.

Source: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/a-picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words.html>, accessed 15th August 2009.

²⁴ James Donald, ‘Imagining the Modern City’, in Sallie Westwood and John Williams (eds.), *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.183.

²⁵ Donald, ‘Imagining the Modern City’, p.187.

Further comparing the image and the text, photographs are only able to document frames of various spaces, and possibly one of their limiting factors is that they are chosen in relation to a targeted audience. As Croset argues, the architectural magazine, 'like all other visual media, is inevitably contaminated by the 'aesthetic model' from advertising.'²⁶ This 'aesthetic model' is the consumer-oriented preoccupation with how the:

...published image must be able to strike the reader at first glance. The determinant in choosing what architecture to publish becomes the building's photogenic quality, a quality that is often totally independent of the real experience lived inside the building.²⁷

This photogenic quality highlights the building's form and is often chosen to showcase the aesthetic rather than the occupational aspects of the building.

Going by the premise that images are unable to fully communicate the nature and spatial experience of a place and that it is up to the narrative of the architecture to give a holistic representation of architecture, there are a few questions that have to be addressed. What exactly is a textual representation of architecture? How has architecture been represented in texts and what are the limitations of those representations, if any?

While images and models are common depictions of architecture, this dissertation is interested in the ability of the text to *enhance* the reader's understanding and experience of a space. It proposes that texts in architectural publications often border on the point of being too pristine, clinical, or matter-of-fact.

To illustrate this point, Katja Grillner argues that 'it is much easier, as a critic, to write about the purely visual and spatial expression and function.'²⁸ According to Grillner, the description of the surrounding built form is easier; rather it is the ability to strike

²⁶ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.203.

²⁷ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.203.

²⁸ Katja Grillner, in 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying' – on Writing Architecture, in an IASPIS (A Swedish exchange program aimed at facilitating creative dialogues between visual artists in Sweden and the international contemporary art scene.) dialogue, and can be found on this website: <http://www.iaspis.se/craft/en2/article.asp?ID=192>, accessed 3rd June 2009.

relationships between the built form and the users that the writer's role becomes much more complex. As such, the description she refers to is largely factual and abstract, often relating to the formal function and geometrical expression of a building, instead of the spatial experience within. Croset pushes this 'easier' narrative mode to a greater extreme with the implication that critics sometimes do not even have to visit the space themselves. Rather, their analysis may be based largely on images, on varying 'aesthetic categories', where they then:

...weave a web of their own abstract writing, largely autonomous from the specific content of architecture, distancing rather than attracting the reader to the work published.²⁹

To borrow a term from Grillner, there is a large difference between 'writing architecture', and writing *about* architecture.³⁰ 'Writing architecture', according to her, is 'the ability of a literary text to present architecture, landscape and complex spaces in a concrete fashion, to bring to life rooms and places.'³¹ In this manner, the architectural narrative moves beyond a mere description of the accompanying images. She sites an example of a fictional text where the house:

...created for a fictional world and existing only in language, becomes in the novel as real a structure as the architectonic creations that are displayed as cardboard models or as drawings which writers on architecture often refer to as though they actually existed.³²

Citing a reversal of roles where a built project is usually the subject of the text, this *written architecture* has become the subject material itself, as real as the physical form. The narrative is thus key in representing its own depiction of physical reality,

²⁹ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.206. Dwight Conquergood also remarks on the preoccupation with the text in his essay *Rethinking Ethnography*. He comments on how 'textualism tends to ignore the flux of human relationships, the ways meanings are created intersubjectively as well as 'intertextually,' embodied in gestures as well as in words, and connected to political, moral and *aesthetic* interests.' Emphasis added.

Dwight Conquergood, 'Rethinking Ethnography', in D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006), p.359.

³⁰ Grillner, 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying'. Emphasis added.

³¹ Grillner, 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying'

³² Grillner, 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying'. Text cited by Grillner is Monika Fagerholm's novel *Den amerikanska flickan* [The American Girl].

and it is this bringing to life of a space's experience that the writer's role becomes clear.

The Architectural Narrative

What makes a text architectural? It is hard to pin point where it stops becoming architectural and starts becoming *banal*, as Croset relates in his experience of reading architectural magazines:

The majority of images appear completely extraneous, abstracted from any real context, and I find that it is impossible to answer a host of banal questions that suddenly become disquieting: Where does one enter the building? Where is the kitchen? What is the light like in this space? What does one see out of the window?³³

In his elaboration, Croset acknowledges the possible criticisms that can be directed at those questions, but it does not necessarily imply that the questions are not significant enough.³⁴ Neither does it imply that the questions are non-architectural. For one to understand architecture and its spaces, it is certainly of use and interest to know *where* light comes in from, *how* it comes in, and how one *feels* when it creates different effects at different times of day. What is perhaps of interest here is the *quality* of a space, amidst a basic knowledge of the functional layout. On the other (extreme) end, Gaston Bachelard illustrates another way of describing a dwelling, in his narration of how he would name the 'chief benefit' of the house; 'I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.'³⁵ The description hints at a more phenomenological way of representing a space, that is, by drawing from one's individual knowledge, past experiences and memories when it comes to reading a space.³⁶

³³ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.204.

³⁴ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.204.

³⁵ Gaston Bachelard, Maria Jolas (trans.), *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1994), p.6.

³⁶ An example of the incorporation of memory into an architectural text is Grillner's text: Katja Grillner, 'Fluttering Butterflies, a Dusty Road, and a Muddy Stone', in Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (eds.), *Critical Architecture* (London: Routledge 2007), pp.138-141.

As examples of concrete references to architecture have been listed so far, can a seemingly ‘non-architectural’ text be used to represent architecture? Perhaps the emphasis needs to be placed on the ability of the text to evoke the reader’s spatial and experiential interpretation, instead of the textual *content* itself. Take for example, George Orwell’s expression of the allure of the past in his book *1984*:

The room had awakened in him a sort of nostalgia, a sort of ancestral memory. It seemed to him that he knew exactly what it felt like to sit in a room like this.³⁷

The reader is drawn into the interpretation of the room through a romanticisation of history. Like the protagonist in the story, the reader can *imagine* how people lived, how they worked, how they would pass their days in the context of their dwellings. Orwell may not have been consciously aware of the architectural qualities of his description; the room he creates is ‘for a fictional world... existing only in language’, but in the novel it takes on the role of Grillner’s *written architecture*.³⁸ The narrative is thus able to evoke feelings in the readers akin to what they would feel when reading a strictly architectural text because both embody an *experience* of space. As Walter Benjamin writes:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.³⁹

The writer’s experience, whether is derived from others or his own, will then *transform* to become the reader’s experience. In the narration of a space, whether based on the writer’s, reader’s or user’s experience, it becomes necessary to define the nature of the experience being conveyed.

³⁷ George Orwell, *1984*, (Heinemann, Oxford: 1990), p.74-5.

³⁸ Grillner, ‘*Grey, rendered, vile, decaying*’

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Harvard University Press, 2002), p.146.

Experience is broad because each person's perception is different, and influenced by various factors like social and cultural backgrounds, personal knowledge, past experiences and individual thought. In *The Evidence of Experience*, Joan W. Scott expands on the problematic nature of experience:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside.⁴⁰

Essentially, the narration of an experience is difficult because it is steeped in the very diversity that makes it interesting in the first place. Experience, as Scott argues, is not necessarily commonly shared and always is accompanied with different contexts. Experience thus is not self-evident. How does the writer fulfil his role of narrating a space while also paving the way for the reader's own perceptions to carry through?

Experiencing Architecture through other Narrative Modes

The art of [narration] is coming to an end...It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness.⁴¹

Benjamin's lament that 'experience has fallen in value' clearly illustrates the decreased emphasis placed on a spatially oriented narrative. Narrative texts that embody contextualised experiences do exist however, for example in Karen Bermann's essay *The House Behind* where diary accounts of Anne Frank, quotes from

⁴⁰ Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', p.367.

⁴¹ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p.143.

survivors of the Holocaust, as well as her own commentary are placed concurrently to evoke the atmosphere of concealment within a ‘secret annexe’.⁴² The intermingling of these accounts result in a hauntingly vivid spatial reading of the hideout, for example, its depiction of the uncomfortably cramped spaces that were so crucial to the survival of the two families who hid there. Another example is Grillner’s doctoral dissertation *Ramble, linger, and gaze – dialogues from the landscape garden*, which she presents as a dialogue amongst three people. The landscape garden serves as a backdrop for an encounter between two 18th century writers on gardening theory (Thomas Whately and Joseph Heely) and a 20th century architect and PhD student.⁴³ Grillner’s article steers clear of becoming a mere fictional narrative by the awareness she places on her methodology. In a critique of her own text, she states that the ‘story is surrounded with layer after layer of additional discourses’, and these ‘offer the reader an immediate way out of the garden, a recourse to a seemingly factual space, providing the ‘scholar’s’ perspective.’⁴⁴ Architectural narratives also can even be expressed in the form of poetry. For instance, to celebrate its 175th Anniversary, the RIBA commissioned a poem from Britain’s past Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion titled *Frozen Music*.⁴⁵

In his poem, Motion incorporates the theme of sight, that which is so crucial to one’s comprehension and appreciation of architecture. Through his written construction of architecture from the small scale (‘four walls, a roof, windows and a door’) to the larger urban scale of ‘city blocks’ and ‘grid[s]’, the relationship to individual users is never left out of sight. Grounding the objectivity of factual descriptions, his city blocks and houses become merely ‘dream[s]’, forming the backdrop to where ‘lives begin’. Instead of categorically listing architectural elements down, he keeps in mind the bodily occupation of architecture, traipsing through ‘pathways, a bridge, courtyards and a song’. In this way he grounds the expression of architecture very closely to the user’s experience of his/her built surroundings.

⁴² Karen Bermann, ‘The House Behind’, in Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile (eds.), *Places Through the Body* (Routledge, New York: 1998), p.168.

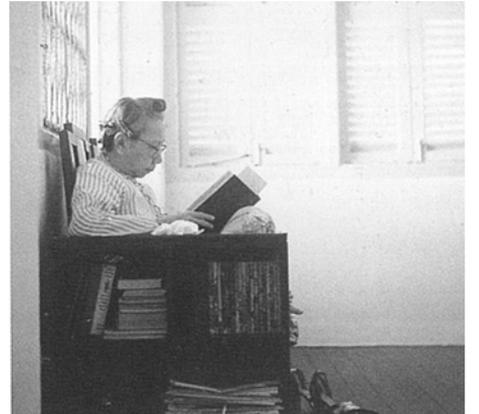
⁴³ Katja Grillner, ‘Writing and Landscape – Setting Scenes for Critical Reflection’, in *The Journal of Architecture*: vol. 8: no. 2: Summer 2003 (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.241-5.

⁴⁴ Grillner, ‘Writing and Landscape’, p.243.

⁴⁵ See Appendix II.

Perhaps one of the difficulties in incorporating ‘creative’ texts in publications is that it is hard to judge the architectural quality of a text. However, as argued above, for the purpose of this essay, the effectiveness of an architectural narrative lies in the ability of the text to convey a spatial experience to the reader, without stating explicitly what the experience should be, leaving it largely to the reader’s interpretation. Hence, the source of interest, and subsequent effectiveness of the three narrative forms listed above lie in how the writers do *not* (be it deliberate or accidental) explicitly give an account of their personal experience. They are able to create an atmosphere that allows the reader to *imagine* the space without being told what they ought to be imagining. As Croset states, this form of narration ‘not only allows the reader to imagine an experience inside the building, but puts him in a condition mentally to connect this imaginative experience to the design work of the architect.’⁴⁶ In this sense, the writer’s role may even transcend that of merely conveying an experience to bridging the gap between architect and user.

⁴⁶ Croset, ‘The Narration of Architecture’, p.205.



CHAPTER 3: WRITING ARCHITECTURE

The diversity and flexibility of the architectural narrative can be drawn from Jane Rendell's expression of the multidimensional aspect of the architectural discipline in what she calls 'Architecture-writing':

...we draw on knowledge gleaned both from within architecture but also from beyond it recognizing that the new understandings produced have relevance both to architecture but also to other subjects and discipline.⁴⁷

Writing architecture, or 'architecture-writing', draws from other disciplines to add to its relational value. The mere mention of column or wall positions, the spacing between fenestrations or the number of levels in a house does not necessary make a text architectural. Architectural narratives do not necessarily have to describe the built form. In this sense, non-architectural texts may perhaps possess more architectural qualities than intentionally architectural ones.

'Accidental Architecture'

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.

- Virginia Woolf⁴⁸

Architectural texts abound in publications of all forms, from journals to books to magazines. They describe design ideas and concepts, construction methods, building materials, the final built form and perhaps most importantly, the spaces. What about texts, however, that have the ability to evoke spatial experiences without a deliberate attempt to do so? 'Accidental architecture' produced through textual accounts, as I

⁴⁷ Jane Rendell, 'Architecture-Writing', in Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (eds.), *Critical Architecture* (Routledge, London: 2007), p.90.

⁴⁸ Cited by Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail* (New York: Metheun, 1987), p.1.

propose, pervades in various ways, from fictional narratives based on fact and history, (for example, Grillner's doctoral thesis *Ramble, linger, and gaze* mentioned on page 15) to even less deliberate means, for example historical and social records. This binary relationship between literature and architecture is expressed for example, in Lilian Chee's description of Sylvia Plath's depictions of her houses, which 'challenge the form and language of detailing in architecture.'⁴⁹ The phrase 'detailing in architecture' is almost always associated with intricate drawings representing different components of the actual built form where different materials meet. Defined as 'all working drawings and specifications of architectural work [that] are instruments of service for use during the actual construction', the construction detail is the architect's main means of communicating design intentions and instructions.⁵⁰

As the architect's primary mode of communication to the builder, the construction detail has almost become synonymous with the *architectural detail*, as shown in Clare Cardinal-Pett's essay on 'Detailing' where the words 'construction' and 'architectural' are used interchangeably to describe the construction detail.⁵¹ However, as this dissertation proposes an alternative mode of architectural narration, it will explore other forms of details in architecture that could lead to similar, if not greater, spatial understanding than that conveyed by conventional architectural texts.

Definitions of the word 'detail' on the Merriam-Webster dictionary are as follows:

1: extended treatment of or attention to particular items

2: a part of a whole: as **a:** a small and subordinate part : particular ; *also* : a reproduction of such a part of a work of art **b:** a part considered or requiring to be considered separately from the whole **c:** the small elements that collectively constitute a work of art **d:** the small elements of a photographic image corresponding to those of the subject

3 a: selection of a person or group for a particular task (as in military service) **b (1):** the person or group selected (2): the task to be performed

⁴⁹ Lilian Chee, 'An Architecture of Twenty Words: Intimate Details of a London Blue Plaque House', in Hilde Heynen and Guulsuum Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.185.

⁵⁰ Breiby, J.C., 'The Making of Working Drawings: Part III, Full-Size Details', *Pencil Points*, July 1923, p.23. Cited in Clare Cardinal-Pett, 'Detailing', in Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth and Duncan McCorquodale (eds), *Desiring Practices* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1996), p.92.

⁵¹ Cardinal-Pett, 'Detailing', pp.92-96.

Taking the second definition, this ‘part of a whole’ can be used to describe different parts of the architectural whole; construction details, details of the site of study, physical traces of an occupant’s space, and even descriptions in stories that indicate the spatial setting of the characters. Details of a site and the traces of an occupant’s space are inextricably linked in that objects of a place more often than not reflect the presence of a lived body. The pieces that make up a story are perhaps the furthest reaching of all, and are limited only by the author’s imagination. The *architectural detail* that this dissertation will examine therefore constitutes the ‘lived detail’; for example, furnishing that reflects how a space has been appropriated for an occupant’s use, or accounts of rituals and daily practices that have taken place in a space. Subsequently, these furnishings and practices reveal the presence of an occupant. Through interpretations of these details, it becomes apparent that *someone lived there*. How then does this bodily occupation better inform the reader’s understanding of a space?

As a young girl playing hide-and-seek with my siblings and cousins, I unconsciously experienced my first comprehension of space. In search of the safest nooks to hide, I became well versed in the art of locating tiny spaces that would accommodate my body. I had hidden in almost every conceivable space in my house – behind voluminous curtains, perched on the window sill, crouching under a desk or trembling nervously in the dark wardrobe of my parents’ bedroom.

Linking this bodily occupation of space to the idea of accidental architecture, an example can be drawn from Chee’s article, *An Architecture of Twenty Words*, in which she brings up Plath’s embodiment of her house at 23 Fitzroy Road. It is full of accidental architectural details; the ‘cramped vestibule that held Hughes’ hulking fame’, ‘the narrowness of the one-bedroom flat that did not take well to her excessive pregnant body’ and the ‘emptiness of her last flat chilled by one of England’s most bitter winters.’⁵² The text is able to translate the tightness of space and the cold gloom of the flat through a description of Plath’s *inhabitation* of her space.

⁵² Chee, ‘An Architecture of Twenty Words’, p.185.

Besides factual accounts of spatial occupation listed thus far, I propose that fictional accounts also play a part in the reader's understanding of a space. Following Grillner's example of a fictional text evoking architectural spaces (discussed on page 10), this dissertation also proposes that architecture can be presented as a 'background phenomenon[on]'.⁵³ To elaborate, architecture is something that one experiences while doing something else. Bringing it to the context of fiction, describing a user's actions might inadvertently bring on an unexpected depiction of a space. As illustrated in my introduction, the red room described in *Jane Eyre* is portrayed as a dark, gloomy and soulless prison; 'no jail was ever more secure.'⁵⁴ The reader is drawn into the story (and the spaces described) through an engrossing plot. We feel Jane's despair and indignation at being unjustly punished, and the room moves beyond a space of neutral ground to a desolate and antagonistic place of entrapment.

⁵³ Katja Grillner, in 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying' – on Writing Architecture, <http://www.iaspis.se/craft/en2/article.asp?ID=192>, accessed 3rd June 2009.

⁵⁴ See Appendix I.

Hidden almost strategically from the continuous pedestrian traffic along Orchard Road, Emerald Hill is a quiet neighbourhood enclave. Fronted by Peranakan Place, a refurbished group of shophouses containing shops, restaurants and bars, it is kept in relative obscurity, and is easily overlooked by the innocent passerby. Accessed from the five-foot-way starting from Peranakan Place, a startling transition from urban to suburban setting is deeply felt as one walks up the slightly sloping site, moving a step higher at almost every next shophouse unit. The rhythmic ascension slips into a mechanical process, leaving one to take notice of the surroundings. Floral square tiles on the walls, swing doors that seem to exist merely for decorative purposes. Glassed-up windows where holes for natural ventilation once existed. High-tech door bells equipped with video cameras and speakers for a thorough surveillance and assessment of the unsuspecting visitor. Balconies, patterned railings, stone carvings. Blue gates, hanging lamps along the five-foot-ways, black-and-white blinds. There is so much for the eye to take in, traces of past and present lives, lifestyles, tastes, unlike newer neighbourhoods where houses all look alike.

Accidental Architecture in the Peranakan House

What is it that distinguishes Emerald Hill from any other residential neighbourhood? What kind of textual accounts of Peranakan houses might evoke one's senses and weave such a rich tapestry of colours, materials, textures, tastes and even smells? The intrigue has also been increased by romanticized portrayals of life in this area, for example in fictional works like Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Goh Sin Tub's *The Nan-mei-su Girls of Emerald Hill*. Through these depictions of life in that area, it invites a list of questions. What was it like to live in Emerald Hill during the time of the Peranakans? Who were the Peranakans? How did they live? What did they do? Looking closely at descriptions of the objects they used, layouts of their houses and their way of life, the next section explores how the Peranakan house is able to come alive through texts written about it.

The Peranakans can be defined as Nyonyas and Babas who are the:

... descendents of Chinese immigrants who settled in the islands of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, many generations ago. They spoke Malay in a *patois* of their own, but retained many Chinese social structures and traditional rituals.⁵⁵

Their heyday was during the height of the British Empire around 1819 to 1900s, and the wealthy Peranakans often readily took to Western customs and ways of life, from education to style of dressing.⁵⁶ However, the practice of Chinese rituals and traditions was still strongly prevalent, and the clash of Eastern and Western cultures is perhaps best reflected in the façade of the Peranakan house:

These houses had the characteristic long narrow design because taxes were calculated on the width of street frontage. In keeping with the narrow houses, even the streets were narrow...Palladian columns on the ground floor may have ceramic Chinese balustrades above them on the balcony. The front porch may have imported European tiles in pastel colours

⁵⁵ Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill* (Singapore: Constellation Books, 2002), p.vi.

⁵⁶ Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, p.vi.

depicting flowers or birds. Porch pillars which rest on carved granite bases may be pseudo Doric or Corinthian and may incorporate joss stick holders. Windows and doors are arranged symmetrically in the Chinese style: two windows flank the door. These windows, however, may have Art Nouveau stained glass panes with wooden or even lead tracery frames.⁵⁷

As if randomly picking on various elements and styles from historical texts, the description of the Peranakan house reads like an eclectic, almost incomprehensible typology. This ‘riot of mixed designs’ somewhat ends on the façade, as the interior of the Peranakan house is conversely a reflection of Chinese traditions, beliefs and rituals, and is only peppered, from time to time, with traces of Western influences.⁵⁸ By first establishing how architecture can be presented through means other than a description of its built form, this chapter will apply this alternative reading to a study of the Peranakan house.

The houses of the Peranakans up to the time of the Pacific War were the settings in which the most important social, cultural and religious values of the community were articulated. Religious ceremonies, births, deaths, marriages and anniversaries were all solemnized or celebrated in the house.⁵⁹

Arguably playing a very large part in Peranakan family life, the Peranakan house is often portrayed as the backdrop to an entire range of events. From births to weddings and deaths, the house features as centre stage around which ceremonies and rituals of every kind revolve. However, as argued earlier, because of the subjectivity and elusiveness of experiential authority, the writer’s experience is not so much the focal point. Rather, it is the *translation* of his experience into a narrative that will evoke the reader’s imagination, allowing the reader to form his/her own interpretation of that space, which matters.

⁵⁷ Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Kuala Lumpur: The Pepin Press, 1998), p.141.

⁵⁸ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, p.141.

⁵⁹ Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, ‘Introduction’, in Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen (eds.), *The Straits Chinese House* (National Museum of Singapore: Singapore, 2006), p.23.

The front hall led into a second hall, the living room, usually through two doorways, one on either side of the central screen partition, although some houses had only one doorway. The partitioning screen was a ‘spirit wall’ to keep out evil spirits by obstructing their straight paths.⁶⁰

The architectural reading in the above description is sequential and straightforward, very much like how one reads a plan. The reader gets a sense of moving from the front hall, to the second hall, and encounters different elements along the way like the two doorways and the partitioning screen. He is aware of his progression into the house, but the passage lacks clues as to how he would *feel* if he were actually walking in. Coupling it with passages of other origins perhaps might add to a richer layering of spatial understanding:

...(the) presence of a shrine to the household deity in the front hall, directly facing the main entrance, which was believed to ensure the protection of the house and its residents from bad luck and evil spirits...The altar, positioned against a partition wall, consisted of a high, long and narrow table and a lower square one.⁶¹

With the elaboration of the objects in the room, their orientation, function, and sizes, a greater contextual understanding is derived. Instead of seamlessly moving in from the exterior, the reader encounters a shrine face-on. A further description shows how the:

...*en suite* tables were made of carved teak or of blackwood with mother-of-pearl inlay. The image of the patron deity was either a painting hung on the wall behind the altar or a wooden or ceramic sculpture placed on the higher altar table. Couplets carved on wooden plaques extolling the deity’s virtues traditionally flanked the central image.⁶²

The increased detail of household objects gives clues to the reader; furniture is dark, occupants and visitors alike are faced with a painting of something intended to induce

⁶⁰ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, p.144.

⁶¹ Lee and Chen, ‘The Reception Hall’, in Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen (eds.), *The Straits Chinese House* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2006), p.44.

⁶² Lee and Chen, ‘The Reception Hall’, p.44.

respect, with the wooden plaques further enforcing a sense of reverence. Overall, a somewhat oppressive atmosphere is evoked, and this is brought to life in Felix Chia's narration of his childhood memories of Chinese New Year gambling in his Emerald Hill house where 'the gambling took place on a round marble top table in the front hall facing my late grandfather's altar!'⁶³ The exclamation mark at the end reveals a childhood fear that has been brought forward to an adult's incredulity at performing an act of utter disregard for spiritual orders. Gaining a sense of the house's sombre mood through the descriptions of dark, solid pieces of furniture, the reader can perhaps relate to the audacity of such an act to a child. The lived detail (the altar), coupled with bodily occupations of a user (the child), work together to present a vivid sense of this space.

The 'lived detail' that this dissertation proposes, following Cardinal-Pett, focuses on 'another kind of intelligence, one not usually associated with architectural design.'⁶⁴ As Naomi Schor also argues, the detail has long been 'bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose "prosiness" is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women'.⁶⁵ The detail is, as illustrated, not 'sexually neutral',⁶⁶ and looking at the lived detail requires us to look at the 'particular, the fragmented, the marginal, the feminine and the inconsequential.'⁶⁷ This leads us to look at the intricacies surrounding the details of living in the largely matriarchal and ornament-driven Peranakan house. Rules were strict when it came to the worshipping of ancestors; and perhaps even stricter when it came to maintaining the purity of the young Peranakan girl who was protected from the evils of the outside world by literally keeping her in:

⁶³ Felix Chia, 'Emerald Hill Revisted', in Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen (eds.), *The Straits Chinese House* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2006), p.36.

⁶⁴ Cardinal-Pett, 'Detailing', p.92.

⁶⁵ Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p.4.

⁶⁶ Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p.4.

⁶⁷ Lilian Chee, 'Domesticity and Monumentality: Performing the Peranakan House, in *Of Fingerbowl and Hankies: Chris Yap Voyeurs through the Peranakan House*, 26 June – 31 December 2009, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2009), p.25.

Living such a secluded life that they were almost cloistered, the Nyonyas could only peep through the slits of almost closed shutters at the outside world; a bench was placed permanently by the window for this purpose.⁶⁸

The bench transcends its function and becomes a reminder and an indicator of the restrictions placed on the young Nyonya. Conversely, it is also the Nyonya girl's only means of experiencing the world outside. The reader can imagine a girl's constant clamouring up onto the bench, body perched in interest and a gaze filled with longing. With daily prayer rites to ancestors who needed to be appeased for peace and prosperity in the house, the tight wrapping of a Nyonya's stomach in her post-pregnancy to retain her physical shape, and having only a window from which to view the world, a heavy air of oppression is evoked from the lived details of these religious and traditional beliefs and their subsequent execution.⁶⁹

Readings of houses are interesting because, like the narration of a story, the reader's derived experience can stretch as far as his imagination. There is no solid proof to affirm or dispute one's interpretation, and that state of uncertainty holds a possibility for events and happenings of any kind. As Tom Emerson states in his critique of Georges Perec's works:

Every possible detail is given, gradually building an image of its current occupant. As a detail is developed, a story or memory is evoked, the text changes direction, becoming a temporal journey, an exploration of the past.⁷⁰

Through 'building an image of its current occupant', the lived detail and physical occupancy should act as a catalyst for the stimulation of personal memories, ideas, and hence, experiences. Applying this proposition to the spatial understanding of the Peranakan house, a further examination of rituals and practices follows:

⁶⁸ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, p.121.

⁶⁹ William Gwee, 'Taboos and Rituals Surrounding a Birth in the Baba Family', in Sue Sismondo (ed.), *Peranakan Heritage* (Singapore: Golden-Day Enterprise, 1988), p.8.

⁷⁰ Tom Emerson, 'From Lieux to Life', in *AA Files: No. 45/46: Winter 2001* (London: The Architectural Association, 2001), p.95.

The most elaborate furnishings were in bridal chambers, which were graced by teak wardrobes, toilet tables and carved gilded chests of drawers. Round portable boxes were always ready for both clothes and ceremonial foods.⁷¹

Hailed as the room with ‘the most elaborate furnishings’, the passage subtly prepares the reader for the wealth of detail that follows. A few lines down, the detail continues; and the room becomes a swarming *mélange* of colours and ornaments, with ‘gilded chests’, ‘Chinese furniture [that was] lacquered red and gilded’ and ‘fancy hanging lanterns [that] were placed around the bed’.⁷² Appearing as a staged scene rather than a regular room for occupation, it is brought back to reality by a somewhat comical narrative of Chia’s duty to ‘roll over from one side of the bridal bed to the other and back. I had to repeat the ritual twice before I could earn my *ang pow*.’⁷³ The lived detail and its evocation of certain atmospheres in the Peranakan house are made even more compelling by the knowledge that people *used to live* in those spaces.⁷⁴ From there, readers are drawn to understanding how these spaces are also produced through occupation.

The texts cited here stem from a study of the detail in the Peranakan house; details of objects, details of daily lives and occupations, and details of its architecture. The reader can thus imagine the architecture through knowledge of how past occupants traversed the spaces, prayed at the ancestral altar and pounded chilli paste on the kitchen floor. Yet while the amalgamation of these factual details have been shown to ‘re-enact’ different spatial settings, fictional details should also be examined as they are not limited by any truths.⁷⁵ Instead, the fictional narrative draws on details that are specifically meant to intrigue and captivate the reader. Perhaps because of this, they may add yet another dimension to the reader’s narrative experience.

⁷¹ Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, p.151.

⁷² Khoo, *The Straits Chinese*, p.151

⁷³ Felix Chia, ‘Emerald Hill Revisited’, in Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen (eds.), *The Straits Chinese House* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2006), p.37.

⁷⁴ See also Lilian Chee, ‘Domesticity and Monumentality: Performing the Peranakan House, in *Of Fingerbowls and Hankies: Chris Yap Voyeurs through the Peranakan House*, 26 June – 31 December 2009, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2009), pp.18-25, where she highlights the added intrigue of knowing that past occupants have inhabited the spaces we study.

⁷⁵ Cardinal-Pett, ‘Detailing’, p.92.

Moving in specifically to this dissertation's subject matter, the fictional aspect of literary texts is highlighted by Stella Kon's postscript for her play *Emily of Emerald Hill*, entitled 'Fact and Fiction in the Play'. Comparing the *Oberon* house (where she grew up) to Emily's mansion on Emerald Hill, she notes that 'Oberon did not have crystal chandeliers, marble floors, or gold bathroom taps!'⁷⁶ She thus illustrates how 'factual memories and fictional elaboration' are 'inextricably mingled in the text'.⁷⁷ Through this 'inextricable' mix of narrative fact and fiction, a certain romanticisation of place occurs. This is also seen in Goh Sin Tub's *The Nan-Mei-Su Girls of Emerald Hill*, where the protagonist Sue Ann stands in the 'five-foot-way, the picturesque old wall tiles and antique swing doors on a familiar building captivat[ing] her attention and fill[ing] her again with nostalgia.'⁷⁸ Romance and nostalgia invoke a heady mix of (subjective) emotions, and perhaps it is this very stimulation of the senses that lends a greater effect to the text, engaging in the reader an intangible yet visceral experience. Further illustrating this, Kon depicts tension in the crowded quarters of her new family where she 'was an orphan from a poor family; I was a girl alone, coming to a house of women who hated me before they knew my name.'⁷⁹ While the above situation may not be the exact reflection of every individual's life, the success of Kon's text in giving the reader a sense of the space as it is lived lies in its 'endowment of poetic purpose' to words that describe 'the 'real' world from which they are taken.'⁸⁰ Therefore, to bring forth an evocative depiction of a space, layering of different details and occupied spaces is necessary.

As illustrated above, spaces can be presented in ways that are un-architectural in agenda – through the lived detail, the bodily occupation as well as in fiction. Perhaps these forms of accidental architecture might be used to supplement a more objective and abstract text, prevalent in architectural accounts. As Tom Emerson argues:

While space...is the armature of experience, it remains fragile and ephemeral...space is the locus of memory (and history) and it must,

⁷⁶ Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, p.59.

⁷⁷ Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, p.59.

⁷⁸ Goh Sin Tub, *The Nan-mei-su Girls of Emerald Hill* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1989), p.171.

⁷⁹ Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, p.9.

⁸⁰ Emerson, 'From Lieux to Life', p.94.

therefore, be protected in order to prevent erasure. It must be described so that it may survive.⁸¹

Whether deeply seated in historical/social/anecdotal records or in literary texts, the ‘lived experience’ that has been explored is not an indicator of an occupant’s tastes, or a critique of his way of living. What this dissertation hopes to evoke is the reader’s imagination, drawing on his/her own knowledge and picturing a space where someone *once lived*. This is the task of the following chapter.

⁸¹ Emerson, ‘From Lieux to Life’, p.92.



CHAPTER 4: WRITING ARCHITECTURE

The Lived Experience of an Emerald Hill House

Recalling the derivation of a deeper understanding of space from ‘accidental architecture’ and the subsequent ‘lived detail’, we look at Sophie Psarra’s study of the link between narrative and architecture in Jorge Luis Borges’ fictions. She concludes that though ‘architecture is an integral part of Borges’ creations, it cannot exist in isolation limited in its own modes of operation.’⁸² Likewise, much as ‘accidental architecture’ surfaces in writings such as those illustrated earlier, they are perhaps inadequate when a more holistic spatial experience is called for. Because the agenda of the texts is not architectural in particular, the spatial reading is fragmented; we do not have a complete picture of the house. The ‘lived detail’ offers a reading of certain *parts* of the space and its traces of occupancy, but to some extent descriptions of architectural elements are still required to prevent the narrative from becoming too fictional or slipping into an abstraction that this dissertation argues against. Perhaps then, the layered reading of a space requires multiple modes of writing. As Psarra asks, ‘how can one form of structuring experience contribute to another?’⁸³

Bernard Tschumi voices the other extreme of writing architecture in *Architecture and Disjunction*, stating:

There is no way to perform architecture in a book. Words and drawings can only produce paper space and not the experience of real space.⁸⁴

At best, ‘architecture when equated with language can only be read as a series of fragments that make up an architectural reality.’⁸⁵ By this, he reflects the inability of isolated details to reenact the physical spatial experience. However, as argued earlier, this is not what the writer’s primary task is. The writer narrates a *written architecture* that is as real as the physical form, without necessarily having to mimic it column for column, window for

⁸² Sophie Psarra, ‘‘The book and the Labyrinth were One and the Same’ – Narrative and Architecture in Borges’ Fictions’, in *The Journal of Architecture*: vol.8: no.3: Autumn 2003, p.369.

⁸³ Psarra, ‘The Book and the Labyrinth’, p.370.

⁸⁴ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p.93.

⁸⁵ Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, p.95.

window. Hence, it is not so much the depiction of real space as it is a *performance* of an experience; in this case, the writer's experience.⁸⁶

Words *do something in the world*. They create a particular reality. Language can bestow forgiveness, a blessing, freedom, citizenship, marriage, a promise, etc. Language *performs* a reality.⁸⁷

Taken into the context of this dissertation, the performance of a reality is appropriated for a performance of my own experience of a Peranakan house on Emerald Hill Road. Like the layers of 'additional discourses' in Grillner's *Ramble, Linger and Gaze* mentioned in the previous chapter, the following text seeks to bring together three different narratives, the biographical, the fictional, and the theoretical/architectural.⁸⁸ The theoretical discourse works to hold the different narratives together.

⁸⁶ In the introduction to the book, Madison and Hamera trace the workings of performative writing and their link to social behaviour, experience and representation. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, 'Performance Studies at the Intersections', in D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006).

Pollock defines performative writing as an act, instead of being a tool for channeling meaning. She then elaborates that while not all-inclusive, there are some traits of performative writing – performative writing is *evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational and consequential*. Della Pollock, 'Performing Writing', in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, c1998).

⁸⁷ D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, 'Performance Studies at the Intersections', in D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006), p.xvi.

⁸⁸ Katja Grillner, 'Writing and Landscape', p.243.

Before the War the house was really crowded. Then during the occupation we had to leave Emerald Hill and go to our sea-side bungalow in Siglap. When we came back, *amboi*, what a mess the place was in, really *sakit hati*... Ever since then I've been clearing up and putting it straight. Now, 1950, I can say that the place is back to its former glory.

- All subsequent excerpts taken from *Emily of Emerald Hill* by Stella Kon

^A *'Embellishing the facades of terraced houses with extravagant decoration was particularly in vogue from the beginning of this century till around 1920...Palladian columns on the ground floor may have green ceramic Chinese balustrades above them on the balcony. The front porch may have imported European tiles in pastel colours depicting flowers or birds.. Windows and doors are arranged symmetrically in the Chinese style: two windows flank the door. These windows, however, may have Art Nouveau stained glass panes with wooden or even lead tracery frames. Above large windows are ventilators which are very often of the Chinese-style bat-wing or fan shape. French windows with fanlights above them are also popular. The fanlights often have wooden bars radiating in a fan shape.'*

- Khoo, p.140.

Subsequent quotes taken from:

Khoo Joo Ee, 'Architecture: Terraced Houses', *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History*, (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1998).

Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *The Straits Chinese House* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2006).

Setting, description, criticism - these aspects appear to be the standard mode of writing employed in architectural texts. The diversity of the writers and their different writing styles distinguish them from one another, but essentially the majority adhere to a similar framework, whether consciously or unconsciously. The setting of the architecture in question could vary from the poetic to the prosaic. The former is exemplified in the *Singapore Architect* journal, where writer Ian Aw describes two Emerald Hill homes ‘huddled snugly together just up the way on Emerald Hill’,⁸⁹ behind the ‘hustle and bustle of Orchard Road’⁹⁰ while the latter is expressed in writer Winnie Yu’s article introducing Emerald Hill as ‘one of the first designated historic districts, [which] has since become one of the poshest addresses in the city’.⁹¹ In both instances, one gets the sense that Emerald Hill is a historic residential enclave close to the city; it is quiet and now very expensive, but what does it feel like to walk into the neighbourhood and experience that difference in atmospheres? As Beatriz Colomina states in her book *Privacy and Publicity*, drawings cannot convey the ‘sensation’ of a place, so perhaps this proposal for an evocative architectural narration could fill in the gaps between the reader/viewer and the described space.⁹²

By taking ownership of their spaces, they appropriate it to their lifestyles, preferences and habits. Proposing that houses go through three stages – anonymity, ownership and appropriation, the narrative begins with the first phase. The historical account is a vivid but objective description of the detail that makes up a typical Peranakan house. Through that description, the reader gains a clear picture of what the Peranakan house looks from the outside.^A What is it then like on the inside? Is there a similar wealth and collision of detail? For a house that has existed from the early 1900s, what are the differences

⁸⁹ Ian Aw, ‘Light Contrasts: No 63 & 65 Emerald Hill Residences’, in *Singapore Architect 2006 n.231*, p.61.

⁹⁰ Aw, ‘Light Contrasts’, *Singapore Architect*, p.61.

⁹¹ Winnie Yu, ‘Tropical Change’, in *The Architectural Review*, June 1999, p.78.

⁹² Beatriz Colomina, ‘Interior’, *Privacy and Publicity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), p.269.

^B 'We lived at No. 60 Emerald Hill Road in a two-storey terraced house. The Hokkien Chinese call such residences *kiah keh choo* from which is derived the Baba term *rumah kiah keh*. It was in this type of house that I was born, and I left after twenty-four years when the house was sold.'

- Felix Chia

^B 'I've lived here since I was born. My family was staying in the house next to this one, where my brother now stays. That was in the 1950s. When we heard that this house was for sale in the 1970s, my father wanted so much to buy it, but our neighbour refused to sell it to us. On my father's birthday, his friend gave him a slip of paper. 'What's this?' he asked. Upon close inspection, he saw what it was – the title deed for 65 Emerald Hill Road.'

- Mr Yeo

in the traces that the occupants leave behind? Transiting into the second stage, Felix Chia's and Mr Yeo's accounts^B set the scene for an occupation of their respective houses.⁹⁴ In Chia's narration, we are reminded of the fact that someone has lived there before. The separate occupancies of houses are tied to a set of memories, experiences, lifestyles and habits; in Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted words, 'to dwell means to leave traces', and each person's traces of living more often than not differ to various degrees.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Felix Chia lived in a house along Emerald Hill Road in the 1930s and he describes his surroundings in an article 'Emerald Hill Revisited' in *The Straits Chinese House*.

Felix Chia, 'Emerald Hill Revisited', Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen (eds.), *The Straits Chinese House* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2006), pp.30-39.

Mr Yeo lives in 65 Emerald Hill Road, and subsequent excerpts are obtained from an oral interview during the writer's visit to the house on 27th June 2009.

⁹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (eds.), Edmund Jephcott & Howard Eiland (trans.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.39.

In the dining-room, I've hung up again our big glass chandelier, which I wrapped up and stored away before the War. The marble floors have been polished shining again; the balustrades on the wide staircase, that the Japs broke, I've found a craftsman to carve them in the same, twining vine-leaf pattern, as they were originally done in the good old days. At every tall window I've repaired the hinged wooden louvers, and hung up long curtains of printed English cotton. All the big, airy bedrooms have been replastered and painted; over each bed there's a white mosquito net like a tent, and from the high-ceiling hangs a modern electric fan that goes round and round to cool the air.

- Emily, p.7.

^C *'The interiors of most terrace houses were similar in layout and there were also some standard features in their furnishing. The three most important areas of the house were always the ancestral hall, the sitting room and the airwell. Doors, window frames and teak panels enriched the interior, complementing traditional Chinese furniture.'*

- Khoo, p.141.

^D *'Because of the narrowness of the terrace house it was not possible to have rooms on the ground floor flanking the airwell. The result was a series of rooms arranged longitudinally. They had high ceilings from which hung Dutch kerosene lamps or chandeliers.'*

- Khoo, p.144.

where do I live?

Having established that an individual's traces are expressed in their houses, it is significant to note that the relationship between occupants and the spaces they inhabit is a binary one. Houses are appropriated by their users, but they in turn 'become inextricable from the houses [they] live in.'⁹⁶ Concrete interior elements^C of the house like the locations of staircases, wall partitions and the general layout of the house affect the way we move through the house while our traces are 'imprinted in the interior' through our insertion of personal objects like furniture, paintings, photographs, and so on.⁹⁷

Looking at the insertion of personal objects into our spaces, it is necessary to re-examine the objects that make up the Peranakan house. My interest in studying the houses of Emerald Hill Road is largely due to their popular interest. They have been portrayed in television drama serials, tourist brochures and fictional texts, all glorifying and romanticizing past days of Peranakan inhabitants. However, by looking at the lived detail, how much of Peranakan-ness is there in the house I am examining? Is it a Peranakan house or a house where Peranakans used to live? The exterior has not changed; the configuration has been updated but its physical make-up still remains. How relevant is it to look at the objects that *used to be* found in a typical Peranakan house? Perhaps the historical detail could serve as a point of comparison, and the house is defined by what it is not.⁹⁸ The house I visit no longer has an airwell, but it remains bright and airy; there are no kerosene lamps or chandeliers but modern designer lights from Norway.^D Instead of revealing *who* lives there, we are informed *of* the people who live there. They collect Chinese ming pots and

⁹⁶ Lilian Chee, 'Domesticity and Monumentality: Performing the Peranakan House, in *Of Fingerbowls and Hankies: Chris Yap Voyeurs through the Peranakan House*, 26 June – 31 December 2009, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2009), p.18.

⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (eds.), Edmund Jephcott & Howard Eiland (trans.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.39.

⁹⁸ The idea of something being defined by what it is not, rather than what it is, was inspired from Chee's 'Domesticity and Monumentality', p.23.

^E 'It's nice isn't it? I was on the Internet looking for an artist to do a glass installation in my home, and came across someone called Nikolas Weinstein. I called him up, and he said he would do it, and ship it over after. I wanted him to assemble it personally, because all these glass petals are so fragile. What if his assistant broke something? I literally had to pay for my cautiousness, though. He requested to be flown here on business class, and I was to pay him \$250 per working hour. It was his first assignment in this region. He has since had other commissions, courtesy of this very installation of course. You can say that I brought him to Asia!'

- Mr Yeo

^E 'All these Ming vases are from my father's collection. When we renovated this house we got a carpenter to custom-make this glass shelf for them. When visitors come we switch on the lights at the bottom. The effect is quite dramatic! Other than that though, it is quite troublesome to maintain. They get dusty so easily.'

- Mr Yeo

^E 'That's a portrait of my father. It was done by a famous oil artist who was based in Paris. When he came to Singapore for four months in the 1970s he painted only five portraits and my father's was one of them.'

- Mr Yeo

^E 'I've had these Chinese ink paintings for as long as I can remember. In the '50s they cost as much as the house next door! The artist is dead, no one will ever paint the exact thing again. I'll never sell it.'

- Mr Yeo

vases, but they also have expensive glass installations. They have sentimental old Chinese ink paintings, but they also have provocative modern artwork like that of Michael Godard's 'Money Laundering'.^E

Our experience is thus fragmented because we encounter these disparate objects in fragments. There is no organized logic to how they are arranged. The antiques are not all placed in one location, and neither are the daily objects. Just as this progression of space and perception of objects is distracted and disjointed, so could the text be framed.

In writing architecture, the text:

...anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders, linked as it is in what Michael Taussig calls "a chain of narratives sensuously feeding back into the reality."⁹⁹

Through Mr Yeo's truncated descriptions of the objects in his house, we move back and forth, from object to object. Through our disjointed yet far-reaching exposure to his personal belongings, we get a growing awareness of his own presence within the house.

⁹⁹ Della Pollock, 'Performing Writing', in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, c1998), p.90-91.

^F *'The walls of the [reception] hall were also decorated with scrolls of Chinese painting and calligraphy, and decorative works of art such as framed embroidered pictures.'*

- Lee and Chen, p.44.

^G *'The Chinese bed, the dresser, cabinet and washstand were of wood with delicate carvings and painted green, red and gold. The bed was decorated with a pink silk curtain, embroidered with a phoenix and peonies. A variety of gold ornaments symbolic of joy and happiness hung in front of the curtain. Even the pink silk pillows were stitched with gold ornaments of very fine craftsmanship. On display in the glass cabinet was a complete gold tea set. In the dresser, piles of Chinese silk and satin of the most vivid colours lay open for inspection. On the washstand was a gold basin and water jug. Everything glittered and shone.'*

- Lee and Chen, p.79.

^H *'The Peranakans...readily adopted the trappings of a colonial lifestyle. English-inspired living rooms, which became prevalent from the turn of the century, were outfitted in the 'latest' fashions with ottomans, chaise-longues, console tables, and Chippendale, Regency or Queen Anne style furniture, together with the older Dutch and Chinese heirloom pieces.'*

- Lee and Chen, p.89-91.

^H *'Radios and gramophones also found their way into living rooms...Families would gather round the piano, and to the accompaniment of violas or violins, accordions, and perhaps banjos and mandolins, popular songs would be sung.'*

- Lee and Chen, p.92-3.

The 'chain of narratives' that feed back into the reality are supplemented by the imagined. For instance, detailed descriptions of Peranakan-living in the past evokes images of how they used to live, but this lifestyle no longer exists. What it can do again is to serve as a marker for the present reading of the house. With this knowledge, the reader is able to pitch details and events of past dwellers against that of the current ones. The elaborately decorated walls,^F the gilded furniture,^G the *chaise-longues* and the ottomans are all set against the objects in the present house.^H Again, the house is expressed through what it no longer embodies instead of what it does.

I set out the family silverware; it's engraved with a capital G for Gan, and a jeweled mountain, the Emerald Hill. The old wine-glasses have the symbol too. I put out the Nyonya china, some of it my mother-in-law inherited from here mother – must be over a hundred years old.

... ..

And then sometimes we would have a musical evening at Emerald Hill, we called it a 'soiree'. Kheong would play his violin, Susie played the piano. I couldn't play the piano but I got a teacher to give me music lessons, and I learned to sing.

- *Emily*, pp.18 & 35.

how do I live?

Architecturally-informed descriptions, no matter how enchanting, only tells one part of the equation, that of the space and its aesthetics. Going back to Yu's article, she invokes the drama of the space where:

There is a wonderful moment when the floors are removed and the entire space is revealed - the rough brick party walls catching the light streaming in between the broken rooftiles - space inherent in the form, but usually concealed with partitions and floors.¹⁰⁰

If the building is, to borrow a term from Colomina, a 'construction' in all senses of the word, normative architectural texts are perhaps constructions in themselves as well.¹⁰¹ To elaborate, it is about weaving together different descriptions of architectural elements to form a space. The abstract tapestry of the 'rough brick party walls' and the 'broken rooftiles' with 'light streaming in' can appear in almost any other house with similar materials and features. In this manner, the writing is not grounded to a specific site and could result in not being so much 'about the image as much as the literary tropes used to create it'.¹⁰² The writer stirs the imagination albeit in a different way; *this could happen almost anywhere*.

Further illustrating the idea of 'construction writing', materials are listed meticulously yet almost soullessly in Aw's article where both of the homes he writes about 'utilise an identical palette of finishes (natural timber, white-painted perforated steel sheets and a proliferation of clear glass)'.¹⁰³ In essence, not looking so much at writing styles as with the *mode of writing*, these texts point to descriptions of the built form, regardless of the alluring masks they

¹⁰⁰ Winnie Yu, 'Tropical Change', *Architectural Review*, p.78.

¹⁰¹ Colomina, 'Interior', *Privacy and Publicity*, p.279.

¹⁰² Peggy Deamer, 'Subject/Object/Text', in Andrea Kahn, (ed.), *Drawing/Building/Text: Essays in Architectural Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), p.35.

¹⁰³ Ian Aw, 'Light Contrasts', *Singapore Architect*, p.63.

^I 'The loud firing of the crackers woke me up on the morning of the New Year. I rubbed my eyes and caught a whiff of the pungent smell of sulphur from the streets which pervaded the house...Dressed in my new pyjamas, I made my way to breakfast, stepping down the stairs gingerly and holding on to the balustrade as I knew that I had just awoken.'

- Felix Chia

^J 'I slept upstairs in a small room next to the front bedroom facing the street, which was the largest in the house, accommodating my grandmother...Outside this area was a corridor leading to my parents' bedroom, and beyond it was the room which the married cousin of mine, her husband and two young sons occupied.'

- Felix Chia

^J 'Walking three stories up everyday is a good form of exercise. My wife and I said that when we are too old to walk so much we'll exchange rooms with my son.'

- Mr Yeo

don. Returning to the significance of the lived detail that grounds the house first in its particular *location*, then to its particular *occupants*, perhaps there is another way to represent space besides a physical description of the built components.

In an attempt to prevent the narrative from becoming a similar form of construction writing as mentioned above, it is necessary to firmly establish the occupant's presence. In essence, apart from gathering a mere assortment of the objects found around the house, an image of how the occupant *uses* and *occupies* his lived space is vital.¹ The reader crinkles his nose at the mention of the 'pungent smell of sulphur' in Chia's narration, sees through eyelids still heavy from sleep and feels the uncharacteristically cautious steps along a staircase that has been used many times before.

Contrasting the two texts, the reader feels the cramped conditions of Chia's house through a narration of the limited number of rooms in relation to the many occupants of the house as compared to the spatial comfort of Yeo's one-bedroom-per-floor situation.¹

Now the garden's gone and the tall apartment blocks press up around the house. The paint is flaking off the pillars of the front porch. On the verandahs, the rattan chairs hang crooked, and dead leaves blow along the patterned tiles. The big bedrooms stay closed. I just sit here, very quietly, listening to the noises from the road.

- *Emily*, p. 53.

there is no Peranakan house.

The Peranakan house is no longer the subject of interest, but the details that exist within it inform our spatial experience. Accidental architecture is manifested through the lived detail, bodily occupation and even the fictional detail. As Akiko Busch states in her introduction to *A Geography of Home*, ‘the comforts of home are inextricably linked with history.’¹⁰⁴ This house is thus home to the historical details of past dwellers, the objects of the present occupant and the bodily presence of both present and past occupants. While a text may never fully ‘perform’ architecture as Tschumi states, what this dissertation proposes instead is a *performative text* that brings out other aspects of architecture apart from a reportorial account of its geometrical forms.

¹⁰⁴ Akiko Busch, *Geography of Home: Writings about where we live* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p.17.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

‘So what does it feel like to kill a man with your bare hands?’

- Esmeralda Villalobos to Butch Coolidge in *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

To appreciate architecture, we may not necessarily have to ‘commit murder’, as Tschumi proposed, but as with the quote above, the quest of the dissertation has been to uncover what it *feels* like to be in a space and what it takes to evoke that feeling through writing.¹⁰⁵ This dissertation has discussed the importance of architectural narration in lieu of a real, physical experience through a space. Elaborating on the various narrative modes from poems like Andrew Motion’s *Frozen Music* and semi-fictional, semi-factual texts like Katja Grillner’s *Ramble, linger, and gaze – dialogues from the landscape garden*, the ability of ‘accidental architecture’ to depict a space was introduced.

In relation to alternative narrative modes of architectural portrayal, the term ‘accidental architecture’, that is, spatial depictions in using non-architectural texts, was proposed. Further, exploring the notion of accidental architecture and its constituents, the lived detail, bodily occupation and spaces depicted in fiction were applied to a spatial understanding of Emerald Hill Road.

Finally, a performed narration of my own visit to an Emerald Hill Road unit was proposed by applying components of accidental architecture into an architectural text. Incorporating biological/occupational and historical footnotes as guides to a theoretical main text, the *lived experience* of a space was conveyed.

¹⁰⁵ Bernard Tschumi’s list of ‘Advertisements for Architecture’ can be found here: Thomas Mical, *Surrealism and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, c2005), p.291-292. See Appendix III.

I finally visited the Opera Garnier two years after reading about it. It had been lovingly restored and everything I'd read about was there; the gilded frames, the mirrored columns, the grand staircase, even the fanciful wrought-iron drainage covers. However, I kept searching in vain for the image I had constructed in my mind.

Perhaps it is true that the narration will only go as far as depicting the 'temporal experience' of the viewer, and that the physical experience can never fully be translated into text.¹⁰⁶ As Stan Allen concedes, 'the dream of a perfect fit between [architecture] and its representation needs to be abandoned.'¹⁰⁷ The aims of this dissertation is not however to seek as realistic an experience as possible, but one that encourages the reader to read space apart from its built form. If there is anything to be taken away from my failed Opera Garnier experience, we can perhaps also argue that the physical reality of a space might not always measure up to the splendour it has achieved in text. *(10,422 words)*

¹⁰⁶ Croset, 'The Narration of Architecture', p.208.

¹⁰⁷ Stan Allen, *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation* (Australia, GB Arts International, 2000), p.67.

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Croset introduces the term 'temporal experience' referring to the experiences that users gain from physically visiting a site. He highlights the importance of the architectural narrative in bringing about that experience for the reading public. Comparing the image and the text, his discussion of how the image falls short further strengthens the need for the text to supplement it.

Katja Grillner, 'Grey, rendered, vile, decaying – on writing architecture':
<http://www.iaspis.se/craft/en2/article.asp?ID=192>,
accessed 3rd June 2009.

Grillner introduces the term 'writing architecture', differentiating it from writing 'about' architecture. This is the ability of a literary text to 'bring life to rooms and places.' The spaces described in written architecture then become as real as physical buildings themselves. Readers thus are able to derive a more evocative spatial reading in architectural accounts.

Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (eds.), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Scott discusses the problematics of experience. It is not self-evident and subject to individuals' backgrounds. The experience we derive from reading thus is not aimed at the 'resolution of contradiction' but instead to leave it open for further interpretation.

Lilian Chee, 'An Architecture of Twenty Words: Intimate Details of a London Blue Plaque House', in Hilde Heynen and Guulsuqum Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Quoting Plath's accounts of her domestic experiences, Chee reflects on the different qualities that make up 'accidental architecture', from the details of living to the bodily occupancy of the user.

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Appendix I.

Passage from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte describing the red room.

Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (London: Marshall Cavendish Partworks Ltd, 1986), pp.8-9.

The red-room was a square chamber, very seldom slept in, I might say never, indeed, unless when a chance influx of visitors at Gateshead Hall rendered it necessary to turn to account all the accommodation it contained: yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion. A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre; the two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn colour with a blush of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly polished old mahogany. Out of these deep surrounding shades rose high, and glared white, the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane. Scarcely less prominent was an ample cushioned easy-chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a footstool before it; and looking, as I thought, like a pale throne.

This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchen; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered. The house-maid alone came here on Saturdays, to wipe from the mirrors and the furniture a week's quiet dust: and Mrs. Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it to review the contents of a certain secret drawer in the wardrobe, where were stored divers parchments, her jewel-casket, and a miniature of her deceased husband; and in those last words lies the secret of the red-room -- the spell which kept it so lonely in spite of its grandeur.

Mr. Reed had been dead nine years: it was in this chamber he breathed his last; here he lay in state; hence his coffin was borne by the undertaker's men; and, since that day, a sense of dreary consecration had guarded it from frequent intrusion.

My seat, to which Bessie and the bitter Miss Abbot had left me riveted, was a low ottoman near the marble chimney-piece; the bed rose before me; to my right hand there was the high, dark wardrobe, with subdued, broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking-glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room. I was not quite sure whether they had locked the door; and when I dared move, I got up and went to see. Alas! yes: no jail was ever more secure. Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as

coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travelers. I returned to my stool.

Appendix II.

To celebrate its 175th Anniversary, the RIBA commissioned a poem from the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion. Entitled 'Frozen Music', it was first read at the Royal gold Medal dinner on 26th February 2009, and is a reference to Goethe who famously said 'I call architecture frozen music.'
<http://www.architecture.com/TheRIBA/175thAnniversary/Poem/Poem.aspx>, last accessed 7th June 2009.

Andrew Motion was appointed Poet Laureate in 1999; he is Professor of Creative Writing at Royal Holloway College, University of London, and co-founder of the online Poetry Archive. He has received numerous awards for his poetry, and has published four celebrated biographies. His group study *The Lamberts* won the Somerset Maugham Award and his authorised life of Philip Larkin won the Whitbread Prize for Biography. His other books include the novella *The Invention of Dr Cake* (2003) and his childhood memoir, *In the Blood* (2006).

An eye, shaded for better judgment,
peers from the cave mouth and imagines
four walls, a roof, windows and a door.
The dream hardens and the door locks.

Another eye, perfectly used to daylight,
Swings the door wide open and images
City blocks, a grid, work-lives and a home.
The dream finishes and the lives begin.

Another eye, still occupied by the horizon,
Looks up straight at the sun and imagines
Pathways, a bridge, courtyards and a song.
The sun sets and the song continues.

The things we build, by linking earth with air,
All settle us to shape and share the world;
Where form meets function, beauty matches truth:
Our better selves take root and quicken there.

Appendix III.

To really appreciate architecture,
you may even need to commit
a murder.



Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses
as much as by the enclosure of its walls. Murder
in the Street differs from Murder in the Cathedral
in the same way as love in the street differs from
the Street of Love. Radically.