

FLAT LIVING: IN PURSUIT OF SINGAPORE'S PUBLIC HOUSING

FIGURE 1
"Sixteen storeys
against the air..."
Photograph:
Lilian Chee, 2010



*O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell,
and count myself
a king of infinite space –
were it not that I have bad dreams.¹*

*He lived there for twelve years, well into
his adolescence. There was an extended
family – his parents, his brother, two
spinster aunts, and his grandparents all
squeezed into 700 square feet of space.
There were silly arguments about small
things like the misuse of shampoo and
whose turn it was to clean their only toilet.*

Singapore is an enigma. It is perpetually poised in survival mode, solving a problem in order to anticipate the next, and counting this artificial adrenaline surge as necessary pragmatism in a bid to evolve, compete and excel. It has been promoted as a global "super-city", and achieved a much criticised if also enviable contemporary blend of Haussmanisation in its physical, economical and social fronts.² The constraints of its physical size has driven rather than restrained the city from conquering the depths of "infinite space". Boasting one of the world's best ports and airports, and considered one of Asia's leading financial centres, Singapore is also a post-industrialised garden city with an existing 1,800ha of parks, gardens

and recreation spaces. This figure will be boosted by another 94ha when the ambitious waterfront botanical garden, conservatory and park, the Gardens by the Bay, is finally completed.³

Since self-governance in 1959, when initially burdened with high rates of unemployment, urban squalor and poverty, its government initiated and successfully implemented a developmental city state in which "pragmatism" was an ideology "in part historically and materially imposed ... by the domestic economic condition and the geopolitical situation of the 1960s".⁴ A capitalist model was adopted for two reasons. First, rejecting the Chinese socialist model in order to ingratiate itself as part of a predominantly non-Chinese Southeast Asian political landscape, and second, to compensate for the lack of indigenous exports and an absence of its own hinterland. The government's reactive stance to a perceived "atmosphere of psychosis, in direct relation to the perpetual challenge of shaky external events"⁵ is key to its phenomenally successful performance on the world economic stage. This idiosyncrasy also gives particular insight into why one of its most touted trophies, the sustained over-

FIGURE 2
Making every
citizen a stakeholder
Photograph:
Debbie Loo, 2008



achievement of Singapore's own brand of public housing, easily distinguishes itself from the conventional model of social housing, which is often perceived elsewhere as a stigmatised state provision.

*The best stake we can give to Singaporeans is a house or a flat, a home. It is the single biggest asset for most people, and its value reflects the fundamentals of the economy.*⁶

They were all neighbours on the same floor – the quiet academic with extensive knowledge of Foucault, the divorcee whose young daughter dressed too well for someone living in a HDB and drove a flashy secondhand Mini, the poultry market stallholder who seemed to have countless tenants going in and out of her cramped flat, and a family whose 90-year-old grandfather aimlessly roamed the void deck with an Indonesian maid in tow.

If physical size was a limitation, the prevalence for speed became the nation's recompense. Spearheaded by the Housing Development Board (HDB) in 1960, 50,000 flats were built in the first five years, and within a decade of the HDB's inception, the housing shortage problem was resolved. Beginning with the provision of basic rental units for the poor, a home ownership scheme was gradually introduced in 1964. To ease the supply of land needed for mass housing, the colonial Land Acquisition Act was amended in 1966 empowering the government to acquire any land necessary to the interest of national development at a rate of compensation determined by the state, a clause arguably in conflict with open-market regulations.

FIGURE 3
The common
corridor as
a space of
communal reverie
Photograph:
Flavia Tenuta, 2010





Currently, over 85% of its 4.9 million population live in public-sector flats, of whom 70% are owner-occupiers. In 2009, the World Bank held up Singapore as “a model of development and effective urbanization”, turning its rural slums into ‘one of the cleanest and most welcoming cities in the world’ in just 40 years⁷. The motivation to house the poor was partly fuelled by an urgency to alleviate the appalling social conditions in the 1960s, and partly because the state believed that eventual mass property ownership would encourage personal stakeholderism and individual commitment to raising the nation’s social and economic standards.⁸ Hence, a roof over one’s head was implicitly tied to the country’s larger ambition of economic survival and its targeted over-achievement.

Yet today, the public housing scheme is by no means the derogatory model inherited elsewhere. It does not lack the capital power of free-market housing, and more importantly, is not the ghetto of the economically and socially disprivileged since its occupancy profile ranges from “financially-challenged families, solid blue-collar families, and also the upper middle class and young upwardly-mobile professionals”.⁹ The scheme has also made provisions and differentiations in terms of flat layout, sizing, finishes, and design to cater for the upper income group. And the HDB has increasingly democratised its decisions by inviting public opinion and seeking collective consensus.

*Singaporeans are obsessed with fighting complacency and being the best. Their history is articulated in relation to the future, not the past.*¹⁰

There was a large field in front of their block. No one knew why it was left unused. In the evenings and weekends, groups of footballers – neighbourhood boys, grown men relaxing after work, and even very young children decked out in organized football jerseys – would gather for a game, setting up makeshift goal posts, having picnics and making a ruckus. Sometimes, as many as five groups shared the same space at the same time. It was chaotic, impromptu, and lively. No one got into another's way. They played with abandonment knowing that the empty field would not remain empty for very long.

Yet this utopian condition has come with a price. Besides rumblings of discontent from a constrained middle-class population who are unable to fulfil their longings for upward mobility because of an overpriced private housing market, there are sentiments for bygone *kampongs* (Malay for “village”), which were lost when the HDB began its aggressive re-housing programme in the 1960s. As established communities were then indiscriminately categorised as chaotic squats, valuable land was clawed back for redevelopment. Following a series of devastating fires which ravaged these villages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, forlorn “squatters” who were left without possessions or homes were consoled that “they were the ‘most fortunate’ fire victims in the region”,¹¹ and the state acted swiftly to procure these sites for progressive reform as “the Legislative Assembly... passed a bill to enable the Government to acquire the Bukit Ho Swee fire site at its pre-fire value”.¹² Land was also strategically created as hills were levelled and seabeds quickly filled up. Prior to 1960, Singapore's

total area was about 581.5 sq km. In 2009, this number grew to 710 sq km, of which approximately 17% is reclaimed land.

In *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing*, a 1967 newsreel programme produced by Singapore's Ministry of Culture, a helicopter hovers over the new-built Toa Payoh and Bukit Ho Swee public housing estates. The film shows an idealised terrain served by an efficient network of roads, orderly housing blocks and neat gardens in between. Unblemished by dirt or squalor, the estates appear perfect but also strangely dislocated. Although the narrator tells us where we are, there is a sense of extreme placelessness from this aerial perspective. Neither scale nor specific features of the ground may be discerned, “When the ground becomes abstract, general, and less articulate, there is less incentive to find subtle nuances within the figure to stand out”.¹³

It is not coincidental that the term “utopia” connotes two contrary meanings, namely, “ideal place” and “no place”. The *Berita Singapura* experience suggests a void landscape, which accompanies “the negation of historical, vernacular and stylistic particularities (that) can sometimes be a useful ... strategy to cultivate notions of progress towards a vague, distant ideal”.¹⁴ This interpretation is entirely consistent with the state's discourse of “utopian progressivism” in which “integrity” (or “*jun zhi*”) is advocated to override the nation's “material limitations (size, physical resources, manpower problems) in order to realise a visionary goal”.¹⁵ Thus, for a future of infinite possibilities, the artifices of land, landscape and home are justifiably utopian – certainly ideal and, if

need be, void.

In the home, citizens are instructed on family size, the timing of household formation and child birth, the language they ought to speak, are compulsorily required to save a fifth of their income, and since 1996, to financially support their parents in old age.¹⁶

She was appalled when her fiancé suggested that they register for marriage early so that it would be convenient for them to jointly ballot for a new flat coming up near his parents' block. Her dreams of a romantic white dress and pretty flower girls were excessive in comparison with

the militant pragmatism of his well-laid plans.

Significantly, the public housing programme constitutes one of the three elements of "control, reform and reward" engineered by the state to harness a "more disciplined and uniform society".¹⁷ In this sense, the concept of "privacy" in the context of Singapore's public housing landscape is complicated. Apart from its outward provisions of material security, comfort, spiritual fulfilment and interiority, "privacy" in public housing comes with its own proviso. Here, "privacy" is not simply what is opposed to the public, open to the outside or the exterior, and only ever



FIGURE 4
Architecture as
"control, reform, reward"
Photograph:
Lee Ling Wei and
Najeeb Rahmat, 2009



FIGURE 5
Traces of the
occupant
Photograph: Flavia
Tenuta, 2010

loosely affiliated to architectural notions of enclosure or transparency.

Enforced in terms of housing subsidies, architectural layout, and, conditions of sale and rentals, otherwise controversial policies such as ethnic integration which ensures fair racial distribution of occupants in each housing estate, "normalised" pro-family structures premised on heterosexual marriage partners intent on procreative coupling, filial piety towards parents who form the extended family and are privately cared for, and even the influence of personal tastes and acceptable public conduct, constitute ongoing programmes which are rarely contested. Housing allocation also shifted with the state's population policy. In a bid to engineer small families, in 1973, one of the spouses for couples which included a female work permit holder married to a Singaporean, had to agree to "sterilization after the birth of the second child or lose government housing subsidy and other concessions".¹⁸ In 1993, 19.5% of married children lived with their parents while 45.2% lived near their parents, thus "endorsing the state's constructions of the "normal" family as the fundamental unit of society".¹⁹ "Abnormal" households comprising children born out of wedlock, same-sex partnership, or even two siblings living together, are still discouraged by stringent sale and rental conditions, and deprivation of regular housing grants.

*I was led
Into the scenes behind the doors...
My voyeur's eyes would rove over
the altars, three prosperities,
cat coin-bank, crocheted tablecloths,
plastic flowers, electric fan
on red plastic stool.*²⁰

They finally saved enough money. At the end of the first day of construction, their flat looked like a demolition site – far from their vision of the all-white, cool minimalist interior they had yearned and saved for since they first saw it in the magazine.

Behavioural patterns and material consumption in terms of interior furnishing are indices of the occupant's sophistication, and significantly also markers of the country's progressive modernism. Rather than simply surrender the interior as a domain to be decked out in one's free time, the HDB home is seen as "both the source and the setting of mobility and change".²¹ In *Our Home*, the HDB's in-house publication circulated free of charge to all public housing dwellers between 1972 and 1989, advice on decorating (such as appropriate choices of colour schemes, dealing with clutter, avoidance of tasteless architectural ornamentation) and courteous living in a high-rise, high-density environment (the misuse of common corridor spaces, the soiling of lifts, disposing of litter from a high-rise) are freely dispensed. Model homes are featured as examples to adhere to.

This "instructive discourse" demonstrates that "the rehoused Singaporean was seen by the state as a novice with respect to modern housing and living", and thus, required guidance in the "repertoires of conduct" for high-rise living.²² More recently, reality-style Singapore television programmes such as *Home Décor Survivor*, *Life Transformers* and *RenovAID* have updated this instructive format but essentially still advocate similar life-transforming alterations on the homefront.

FIGURE 6
Intimate laundry
overlays a
nondescript facade
Photograph:
Lee Ling Wei and
Najeeb Rahmat, 2009



Yet as the population turns more sophisticated and is materially better endowed, expressions of frustration bubble up. In a 1996 survey conducted among 418 Singaporeans aged between 21 and 30 years of age, the majority polled that their “Singapore Dream” relied on, among other perks, better housing.²³ There was “a sense of relative deprivation among those who cannot achieve their “Singapore Dream”... [and] [i]n this way, the public housing landscape ... may in fact become a symbol of entrapment, and class and status immobility for the Singaporean aspiring to private housing...”²⁴

*Now he saw it at once. The little town centre, the little hillock, the little community centre... the little people... nothing spectacular... yet beautiful. In the tiny identical rooms, he knew that people were eating, making love, watching TV. People who were... full of dreams (or) washed out with despair.*²⁵

The officer at the flat interim upgrading ballot station relentlessly persuaded the twenty-something-year-old man that he should vote affirmatively for the installation of a new lift at his block. The former reasoned that it would be more convenient in the long run, would raise the standards of living, and ultimately increase the value of his property. The latter was adamantly against the idea, arguing that it would destroy the character of his flat. In fact, the young man knew he was being irrational but did not like incessant change, and particularly loathed being told what was the “right” thing to do.

Official narratives of Singapore’s successful and prevalent public housing

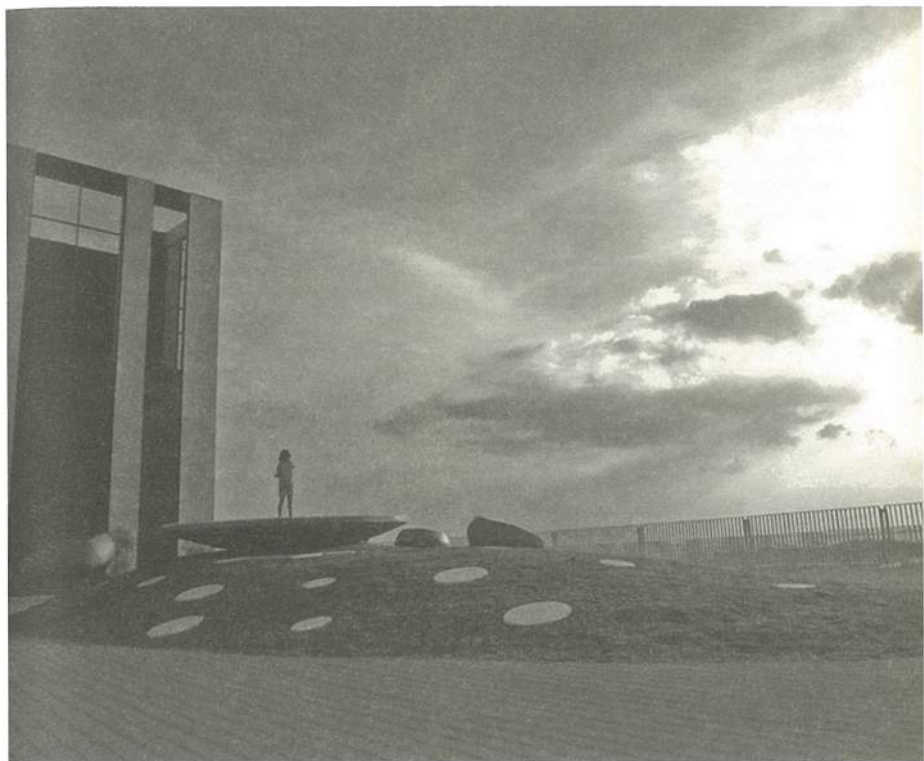
FIGURE 7
Sunset at the Sky Garden
on the fiftieth storey of
The Pinnacle, the HDB's
latest design showpiece
Photograph: ARC Studio
Architecture + Urbanism
and RSP Architects
Planners & Engineers
(Pte) Ltd

scheme have portrayed it as heroic, magnanimous and liberating. Focusing largely on a modernist architectural vocabulary emphasising an egalitarian distribution of public and private spaces and facilities, the notion of home, in this instance, has been primarily defined through an evolution of neutral architectural forms such as shared corridors, public void decks, high-rise tower blocks and efficient add-on modular rooms.

Yet this uncompromising formal language is contradictorily moderated by the use of emotive spatial metaphors. The most popular one being the "heartland" – a term

strategically coined by the HDB to invoke a sense of shared belonging, a personal stake in the "land", and a motivation to seek one's "roots" locally. "Heart" connotes "interiority, the essential, and the emotive".²⁶ Read jointly, "heartland" alludes to sentimental attachment. In official rhetoric, public housing is always located in the "heartland", leading to the notion that home is less tied to the concrete shell of a flat than it is to a people's emotions. Consequently, one may also assume that there is a tangled relationship between the "heartlander" and the psychical fabric of home, which operates beyond state-sponsored aims. If the physical fabric of public housing is construed as masculine in its defined ambitions and forms, then, the psychical weave of home is its corollary, reiterating the intimacy of the personal and the feminine.

How this emotive feminine metaphor gels with the objectified masculine modernist language of Singapore's public housing is hinted at in the archive of recent Singapore film, which begins to critically spatialise the experiences and aspirations of its "heartlanders".²⁷ In films like *12 Storeys*, *Mee Pok Man*, *Singapore Dreaming* and *15*, the heartland is a site of loss. Instead of congenial harmony suggested by the warm and fuzzy metaphor, the heartland is a space of alienation, marked by angst, anonymity, isolated lives, self-estrangement and unfulfilled dreams. In the films, characters are spatialised against recurring and familiarised settings of cramped multi-generational interiors, homogenous exterior façades featuring unit after repetitive unit, blank walls separating socially different classes and families, and lonely corridors where neighbours



ultimately remain anonymous to each other. The plots express a desire to “relocalize” at a non-statist level what it means to live within the idealised if deterritorialised modernist locales of Singapore.²⁸

Even if modernist living appears to physically enclose the occupant, traces of modernism’s Other, that is the heartland in this instance, is not easily contained.²⁹ “Privacy” leaks out at architecture’s edge, as if unwittingly projected into the “public” realm: footwear, altars and disposable paraphernalia are visible on common corridors; laundry hangs freely on suspended bamboo poles at the rear

ends of each block; the common “void deck” at the base of each housing block is the scene of intimate spectacles such as weddings and funerals; and sounds from different radio programmes and uncommonly used dialects spoken at home travel between walls. These are the “private” material traces of the heartland. They betray the identities of those who move in and out of these walls, challenging the bland smoothness of each redesigned façade in favour of distinction, chaos, noise, and uselessness.

I think that people are starting to realize that this is the most advanced city-state in human civilization, this is the twenty-first

*century city and if they don't like what they see then they'd better do something about it fast: because this is the future of urban living and a host of countries are lining up to learn how to copy what they've done here.*³⁰

They had been educated on a lot of campaigns in their time – how to use the lifts, how to be friendly to the neighbours, how to avoid throwing “killer litter” from the upper storeys, why it was wrong to soil the lifts and corridors. Though they sometimes minded being told what to do, they had resigned to the fact that some people did need to be reminded. Just yesterday her daughter almost stepped on a puddle of urine in the lift.

Public housing in Singapore is an enigma. Its complex ideology, agendas, and multivalent occupancy produces architecture riddled with contrasting meanings. It is a site where multiple agencies – the state's, the people's, the free market's, and the individual's – are enacted, challenged and re-enacted. To see the scheme's success primarily as a one-sided intervention by the state is overtly simplistic. Its triumph relies as much on the acquiescence of a populace who are, in part, complicit in managing this blueprint for “progressive” living.

As the population becomes more affluent and less forgiving, more demanding and less accommodating of tough policies and limited choices, the public housing project has to move on from merely fulfilling basic housing needs. While demand for housing is unlikely to subside, the relevance of the project as a means of addressing a changing demographic eager for individualised self-definition, and in particular, of delineating the shared

ambitions of communal high-rise, high-density living in the twenty-first century requires serious engagement. This responsibility cannot be the state's alone. The public's commitment to radical reform is equally critical.

In effect, Singapore's public housing scheme as national ideology and instrument needs to be continually constructed, branded, narrated and circulated in order to survive. Like Singapore herself, its public housing is a construct whose meanings continue to vacillate, and whose identity needs to be re-constituted and represented, again and again, over time and space, by earnestly acknowledging its shifting occupants, agencies and policies. These gestures and performances accumulate towards a distinct identity, are normalised after successive repetitions, and eventually constitute part of a formidable urban landscape. Consequently, Singapore's public housing may not be such a flat commodity. If possible, it is to be altered, but certainly, to be lived.

*You did not make this place,
had no hand in poisoning these
sixteen stories against the air.
You only live here, and living,
alter its space.*³¹

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene II.
- 2 Singapore's status as a "super-city" was promoted by its Tourism Board; see, for example, *The Official Guide* (Singapore: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, 1995).
- 3 The first phase of Gardens by the Bay is expected to be completed at the end of 2011.
- 4 Chua Beng Huat, "Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore", in Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiang and Tan Em Ser (eds.), *Understanding Singapore Society* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), p. 311. For discussions on Singapore as a developmental state, see Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), pp. 6-12.
- 5 Philippe Regnier, *Singapore: City-State in Southeast Asia* (London: Hurst and Company, 1991), p. 230. Cited in Perry et. al., *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, p. 10.
- 6 Comment made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1995.
- 7 "Our History: Development", Retrieved on 20 June 2009 from <http://app.www.sg/who/40/Development.aspx>
- 8 Chua, "Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful", p. 315.
- 9 Robbie Goh, "Things to a Void", in Robbie Goh and Brenda S.A. Yeoh (eds.), *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents, and Interpretive Experiences* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2003), p. 64.
- 10 David Turnbull, "Soc. Culture; Singapore", in Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p. 231.
- 11 Comment made by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Mr Chan Chee Seng in "The "most fortunate" fire victims in Asia", in *The Straits Times*, 17 November 1964, following the Kampong Pulau Minyak fire in 1964.
- 12 "Bill to acquire Bukit Ho Swee fire site passed", in *The Straits Times*, 1 June 1961.
- 13 Robin Dripps, "Groundwork", in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds.), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 77.
- 14 Goh, "Things to a Void", p. 69.
- 15 Goh, "Things to a Void", p. 71, see note no. 16.
- 16 Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, p. 6.
- 17 Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, p. 11. The other two elements of control are a network of "parapolitical" community-based, grassroots institutions linked to the state, and a series of public campaigns and programmes designed to alter behaviour such as productivity, public hygiene, courtesy, family planning, energy use, moral values and speaking Mandarin. From 1968 to 1982, 66 campaigns were launched.
- 18 C. L. Tai, *Housing Policy and High-Rise Living: A Study of Singapore's Public Housing* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1988), p. 114. Cited by Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, p. 246.
- 19 Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore*, p. 115.
- 20 Alfian Sa'at, "Jobweek 1992", in *One Fierce Hour* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 1998), pp. 5-7.
- 21 Daniel Miller, "Behind Closed Doors", in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 4. Cited by Jane M Jacobs and Stephen Cairns, "The modern touch: Interior design and modernization of post-independence Singapore", in *Environment and Planning A*, v.40 2008, p. 576.
- 22 Jacobs and Cairns, "The modern touch", p. 583.
- 23 Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore*, p. 100.
- 24 Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore*, p. 100.
- 25 Darren Shiau, *Heartland* (Singapore: SNP Editions Pte Ltd, 1999), p. 120.
- 26 Teo Yee Chin, "Transforming the Heartland – Changing Appearances and Functions", in *Singapore Architect*, v.227 (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 2005), p. 84.
- 27 *12 Storeys* (1997) dir. Eric Khoo; *Mee Pok Man* (1995) dir. Eric Khoo; *Singapore Dreaming* (2006) dirs. Woo Yen Yen and Colin Goh; *15* (2003) dir. Royston Tan.
- 28 C.J.W.L. Wee, "The Homogenized Urban Environment and Locality", in *The Asian Modern – Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 1997), p. 77, cited by Leong Wei Lin, *Spaces of Alienation: Spatial Stories from Eric Khoo's 12 Storeys and Mee Pok Man*, unpublished dissertation, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, 2008, p. 10.
- 29 For an extended discourse on privacy and the projected image of the HDB flat, see Gulsum Baydar Naibantonglu, "Thresholds of Privacy and the Ideal(ized) Home", in *Singapore Architect*, Special issue on housing, n.189 (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects, 1995), pp. 26-31.
- 30 Tay Kheng Soon, cited by Tyler Brule, "Singapore Sting", in *Arena*, UK Edition, November 1995.
- 31 Simon Tay, "The Flat-Owner", in Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee (eds.), *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2000), p. 74