

Domesticity, Gender, and Architecture

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In Mike Mills' poignant coming-of-age film *20th Century Women* (2016), it is 1974, and an adolescent boy Jamie is growing up in an open-spirited Santa Barbara household with Dorothea Fields, a Depression-raised, single mother in her mid-50s. Dorothea's domestic space has a permeable quality, "[Home] had always in one way or another been open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations, which always stretched beyond it" (Massey 1992, 14). Won in an auction, it is crumbling and urgently needs repairs that Dorothea cannot afford. One of her lodgers is an ex-mechanic, William, who works on the house in exchange for rent. Believing that it takes more than a mother to raise a "good man", Dorothea enlists the help of two young women—Abbie, another lodger who is a punk artist-photographer, and Julie, a precocious teenage neighbor. Her home is maintained by an alternative economy of gifting, exchange, and good will. An analogical relationship may be drawn between the perpetually incomplete state of Dorothea's house and her own resistance toward a nuclear, heteronormative family. If indeed the institution of marriage is historically foundational to the privilege of the single-family house (Wigley 1992, 336), then a critical discussion of Dorothea's domestic space demands new theoretical tools, evidence, and narratives.

Instead of starting from the stable referent of the single-family house, how does thinking through domesticity transform the discourse of house or home? In other words, does the family-centric idea of a house, create blinds pots in its own discourse? Does it exclude specific groups of people, their practices, and the spaces they occupy? In her thought-provoking essay, the architectural theorist, Gulsum Baydar (2005), similarly argues that the absence of nonnormative subjects from studies of domesticity reveals the risks these subjects pose to destabilizing conceptual boundaries, not just of domesticity but of architecture itself. In particular, Baydar identifies the criticality of gender and sexuality in sharpening the discourse of domestic architecture:

Sexuality is an implicit burden of domesticity and its architecture. It is implicit because the sexual overtones of architectural discourse on domesticity are too often and too conveniently naturalized. It is a burden because the stakes in its recognition are usually high. Once sexuality is explicitly and critically addressed, disciplinary boundaries are threatened, established categories fail, and new terms emerge, which productively disable the status quo.

(Ibid., 30)

At the same time, the architectural historian Barbara Penner (2020, 160) rightly emphasizes that we cannot discount the longstanding significance of home which "remains operative

culturally, as a symbol, a space, and a set of values and practices”. “Home” might refer to physical, architectural, social, or imagined entities of varying scales. It could mean a single-family house, an apartment, a communal space (a squat, for instance), a temporary refuge from harm (a refugee camp, for instance), a transient space (a hotel, a serviced-apartment, for instance), a mobile space (a caravan or a boat, for instance), a colonized territory, or a national frontier.

Mass housing and the single-family house are, as the architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright (1987, 12) observes, “the favorite design problem(s) of twentieth-century American architects” wherein an exploration of “personal visions”, “formal innovations”, and “symbolic expressions about concepts like function or family” might be productively undertaken. The absence of domesticity, or more significantly, the anxiety toward its appearance in the discourse of architect-designed homes or housing (Heynen 1999; Sparke 2008) is the legacy of a discipline that has prioritized design documentation being anterior to occupation. Consequently, the intersections of occupancy and lived experiences with design intent, programmatic function, aesthetic taste, and use of materials, remain largely unexamined (for exceptions see Penner 2018, 2013, Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel 2012, 2007).

Here, I differentiate the more monolithic conception of “home” from the more processual aspects of “domesticity” and “domestic space”. Domesticity involves productions from which home, wherever this is located and whatever forms it may take, is actively constructed through occupancy. Its evidence is deposited in objects and routines associated with such a space. Domestic objects may be useful or frivolous, ranging from the modern kitchen and the air conditioner to the decorative vase and the holiday souvenir. Domestic routines include maintenance processes (housework such as cleaning, washing, mending, laundry), creative practices (sewing, cooking, gardening, decorating), affective care (child-raising and elderly care), and increasingly, productive paid labor (freelancing from home, or the rise of the “home office”). In an earlier essay (Chee 2013a), I argued that in positioning homemaking as an ideological production, domesticity is inherently opposed to phenomenological accounts of home which emphasize stability and nostalgia (Bachelard 1994; Heidegger 1993):

It concerns specific expectations of tradition, continuity and privacy. It connotes modes of production: biological, material, psychological, social, or national. Domesticity draws upon the performative aspect of bodies in space — occupants, tenants, parents, grandparents, children, single men and women, maids, architects, designers, builders — and delineates how these individuals visualize, negotiate and realize ambitions for comfort, security, privacy and independence provided through the agency of architecture.

(Chee 2013a, 12)

Domesticity equally regulates unremarked modes of production including housework, childbearing, and caring. It implies particular “spatial arrangements, in which certain practices of reproduction (... as well as certain modes of production) are situated” (George 1998, 3). Furthermore, and pertinent to this chapter, domesticity traditionally reproduces and protects social relationships that are conducive to biological reproduction and the maintenance of heteronormative family life. In so doing, domesticity articulates the gendered politics of home wherein housework, childbearing, and caring are roles regularly prescribed to a wife or a mother, who is assumed to operate exclusively within a separate, private sphere. Thus, domesticity, as the architectural historian, Hilde Heynen (2005, 7), argues, is inherently more than the study of private dwellings because it delineates an “ideology” that discloses the “norms” for “gender, space, work, and power”. As such, domesticity also gives us insights into and can be discussed “in terms of legal arrangements, spatial settings, behavioral patterns, social effects, and power constellations—giving rise to a variety of discourses that comment upon it or criticize it” (Ibid.). Penner (2020, 139) similarly cautions

that an architectural discourse of home cannot be pursued critically without considering the gendered relations within it because these domestic relations mirror those prevalent outside of home, “Whether our historical focus is on patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism or imperialism (or the way in which these operate in concert), the home quickly emerges as a crucial nexus for the formation and regulation of gender relations”.

This chapter reconsiders the connections between domesticity and architecture through the former’s gendered dimensions. The first part of the chapter revisits the fraught relationship between domesticity and gender during the 1950s to the 1990s, by surveying the resistance toward and subsequent reclaiming of agency through domesticity. It draws on architectural texts as well as key art works and films that reframed the boundaries and reconfigured a gendered understanding of domestic space. The second part discusses the development of domesticity as an analytical category in recent contemporary architectural discourse. Incorporating research conducted in the Asian context, I also attempt to situate domesticity and gender within an architectural continuum that extends beyond its customary Anglo-American sphere of influence. I argue that confrontational issues emanating from domesticity and gender can be communicated through an affective mode and that this route is methodologically strategic particularly within a conservative Asian context.

Happily Accommodating: Gender, Sexuality, and Modern Domestic Architecture

Peaking in the 1950s, the American postwar cult of domesticity found many women taking on the role of homemaker at an earlier age, with their average marriage age dropping to 20 years by the late 1950s (Friedan 1983, 16). This trend coincided unsurprisingly with the rise of modern architecture in the United States. Modern architecture in the US found its international footing in 1949 with the construction of three iconic houses in the same year—Philip Johnson’s Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut; Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois; and the Eames House in Santa Monica, California (Colomina 2007, 24). Later, in July 1950, the widely read French architecture journal, *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, devoted an issue to the single-family house featuring among its cast of international architects, ten American architects including Johnson, Pierre Chareau, Richard Neutra, Paul Laszlo, and Paul Rudolph (Ibid., 25–6).

Architecture was key to the depiction of mid-century American middle-class contentment as smiling families posed in picture-perfect interiors or frolicked on manicured lawns. Paraphernalia associated with the fulfillment of domestic bliss ranged from kitchens (Penner 2018), lawn mowers (Wigley 1999), and sanitary wares (Penner 2013) to the art and politics of interior decoration (Penick 2014; Sparke 2008). The architectural historian, Beatriz Colomina, attests that the brand of domesticity in the postwar years was “embattled” and “obsessive” (2007, 19) with the American home of the 1950s packaged as a middle-class, mass consumable commodity. With the “new form of domesticity ... found within images” (2007b, 8), a consumerist impulse to recreate the ideal home was opportunistically taken up by mass media, particularly product advertisements as well as home design and home decorating publications. Domesticity reemerged as the veritable battlefield where homeowners exercised control over their individual household environments. Through its accessibility and reach, domesticity was an effective weapon to pacify widespread anxieties consequent to the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The accumulation and explosion of fashionable furnishings, home appliances, interior design manuals, and numerous housekeeping magazines eulogized the virtues of sewing, cooking, and decorating. Significantly, the target audience of such aggressive media campaign was the housewife.

Yet architecture was slow to catch on to the mass consumption of the domestic interior. Architects particularly steered away from the “kitsch”, “vulgarity”, and “triviality” associated with populist home improvement trends (Colomina 1991, 4–5). Where architects embraced this paradigm,

architectural representation was reconceptualized as if architecture came “straight out of the logic of Hollywood” (Colomina 2007, 31). Among those testing such new media boundaries were the American architect-artist couple, Charles and Ray Eames. Charles Eames was trained in architecture but was prolific in stage and product design, while Ray Eames was a painter and artist with an acute sense of color and texture. Invited in 1958 by the magazine *Family Circle* to respond to the proposal “If I could tell a woman one thing about furnishing a home”, Charles Eames distinguished himself from other architects (who showed their own works) by featuring “a Native American pueblo interior ... in which rugs, blankets and other textiles served both decorative and functional ends” (Kirkham 2009, 172). The design historian, Pat Kirkham, points out that the Eameses’ “affection for things” (Ibid., 2009) resulted in their refusal to make anything sacred. Their house (Case Study House No. 8) was inevitably caught among knickknacks—driftwood salvaged from the beach, combs, decorative cherubs, textiles of various origins and fabric, Mexican piñatas, potted geraniums and *Monstera deliciosas*, porcelain and brass dishes, and weather-worn pebbles. The Eameses called their eclectic mix of things “functioning decoration” (Ibid., 2009). In their house, decoration was an integral part of the couple’s design ethos, and thus, completely at one with architecture.

Nevertheless, modern architecture continued to eschew decoration in preference of structure. The Eameses’ fascination for objects was perceived to be eccentric at best and schizophrenic at worst: “a frightful case of overcompensation, the spare frame of the exterior, where economy is definitely key, conceals an interior world of magpie acquisitiveness and eclecticism” (Jones and Canniffe 2007, 14). The advent of the acquisitive postwar domestic consumer, however, translated into “the role of the architect (being) simply that of happily accommodating these objects” (Colomina 2007, 108). Charles Eames himself declared how he regretted not treating their house less as architecture and more as a kind of “product design” (Charles Eames quoted in “Life in a Chinese Kit,” *Architectural Forum*, September 1950, p. 96. Cited in Colomina 2007, 30). In fact, the success of the Eames House is instructive of how modern architecture gradually began to shift its representational modes. The architect had to tune in to a new audience who were coaxed by mass media to desire, acquire, and consume at home:

Where did the work of the designer end and that of the occupant begin in this house? Were the famous colored panels on the façade ephemera (picked up from the history of modern art like the pieces of driftwood the Eames were always picking up and rearranging) or “unself-conscious structure”?... But for the Eames, the real architecture of the house was to be found in their endless rearrangement of the collectibles within it. The real space was to be found in the details of their daily life.

(Colomina 2007b, 90–1)

The convivial atmosphere cultivated by the Eames through their own personalities and their designs were part of a “propaganda campaign” (Colomina 2007, 12) which embedded a laudatory view of Americana. Colomina reminds us how the Eames, who were commissioned by the US government in 1959 to curate an exhibition and a film in Moscow, also designed mass-produced plywood military products during the war. Charles and Ray Eames were acutely aware of how powerful the mass consumed image could be. They purposefully choreographed the portrayal of their designs—the house; their iconic Mid-century Modern furniture designs; their trove of collected objects, both unique and banal; and their intensely documented daily routines. Carefully curated images appeared regularly on a wide range of mass media including television, women’s and household magazines, advertisements, exhibitions, and film. These images transformed the image of modern design from austere, masculine, and aloof, to celebratory, airy, and livable. Demonstrating a magpie tendency, the Eames also gave the aesthetics of modern architecture an ambiguously gendered turn, albeit accommodating softer textures, a wider color palette, and a greater tolerance

for an assortment of everyday things. Altogether, these decisions spelled a congenial design attitude to everyday life. Gradually becoming iconic as an image, the Eameses' personal domestic environment was strategically used to advance national sentiments of the "good life". That their personal papers were eventually deposited at the US Library of Congress following their deaths attests to the couple's casual domesticity and their household designs being inseparable from the political contexts that surrounded their architectural and autobiographical making/remaking.

In her study of mid-century American domestic architecture, the architectural historian Monica Penick (2017) makes a similar argument. Penick points out how *House Beautiful*, a consumer lifestyle magazine in the 1950s, led by editor-in-chief Elizabeth Gordon, influenced the formation of a distinctively American domestic lifestyle and brand of architecture. Gordon emphasized the importance of an aesthetics that did not reject traditional styles while preserving the functionality and performance of modern design. With its large readership, *House Beautiful* successfully pushed for an "architectural setting" which matched a desired "sociocultural value system" that became known as the "American Style" (Penick 2014, 224). The "American Style" meshed social life and domestic life, catered for the needs of children, realized mundane domestic needs such as the necessity of storage space, and strove to make design more accessible and amenable to the masses. Yet, although both the Eames House and *House Beautiful* reconsidered the gendering of domestic space through their eclecticism and accommodation of mass preferences, neither explicitly addressed the gendered blind spots of American domestic architecture with its unsaid reliance on the housewife as perennial guardian of that cherished traditional lifestyle.

Thus, at the same time as the architectural designs of middle class, single-family dwellings were being fought across opposing fronts, the surge in domestic bliss had already been heavily criticized for suppressing women's nondomestic potentials. In her polemical 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir saw women's domesticated roles as ultimately stripping them of their subjectivity. Mistresses of their homes, they became the passive "Other" restricted to supplementing, maintaining, and nurturing husband and family. While a man sees marriage and domestic life as a natural progression of "his work and political life",

...the wife has no other task save the one of maintaining and caring for life in its pure and identical generality; she perpetuates the immutable species, she ensures the even rhythm of the days and the permanence of the home she guards with locked doors; she is given no direct grasp on the future, nor on the universe; she goes beyond herself toward the group only through her husband as mouthpiece.

([1949] 2011, 506–7)

Significantly, it was also because of housewife malaise and unhappiness in American suburbia, that a feminist revolution was sparked off in the 1970s. That decade marked the middle of 30 turbulent years when second-wave feminism gained momentum particularly in the United States. Historically, feminism was important in reconfiguring a critical perspective of home. Liberal and socialist feminist discourse reexamined and questioned the effects of domestic life and the gender-biased designs of the domestic sphere. Second-wave feminism openly debated controversial issues, many of which impacted the formation of the domestic sphere and its unquestioned notions of privacy and rights to space. These issues included sexuality, familial structures and privacy, reproductive rights and contraception, inequalities in the work place, and domestic violence. In particular, the vocalization of a woman's place at home was provoked in 1963 by Betty Friedan's polemical book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argued that the need to keep up appearances and maintain a picture-perfect household—influenced no less by consumerist mass media features published in magazines such as *House Beautiful*, or the home improvement television shows that popularized the Eames and their lifestyle—resulted in the suburban housewife suffering low self-esteem and

depression. Identifying the suburban single-family house as the site of “the problem that has no name”, Friedan accords this problem a subject and a voice:

As she [i.e. the suburban wife] made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Club Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: “Is this all?”
([1963] 2010, 5)

Contemporaneously, feminist practitioners in art and film also produced critical work that challenged the conventional stereotyping of women at home. In 1969, following the birth of her first child and crisis of self-definition as artist/wife/mother/woman, the artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, wrote the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. Ukeles (1969) asked, “After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” The manifesto sought to raise awareness of how housework—for example, cleaning, cooking, and child-rearing—though habitually accorded low cultural status (minimum wage or unpaid labor), were in fact central to one’s well-being. Such maintenance work ensured that comfort and ease went undisrupted. Ukeles’ works included public acts of cleaning and waxing floors and collaborating with maintenance staff and cleaners at the museums. Her art challenged the binary thinking which separated the professionalization of art from mundane everyday domestic life (Phillips 1996).

In artist Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Rosler plays the housewife who demonstrates her kitchen tools, classified in alphabetical order. As the film unfolds, the housewife’s efficient passivity turns into unpredictable aggression—she stabs the fork and, then more violently, the ice pick, in the direction of the viewer. At the end of the alphabet, Rosler inscribes U, V, W, X, Y, and Z using her body, showing how the housewife is instrumentalized and subsumed at home, eventually becoming one of her hyper-efficient kitchen tools. A similar kind of passive domestic aggression is portrayed in filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). The film creates a “concreteness of image” (Margulies 1996) around the household routines of Jeanne, a devoted single mother who also works as a prostitute from her apartment. Akerman’s long takes on Jeanne’s domestic rituals when preparing dinner or fussing over her son not only defines the film, but also overshadows what would have been a filmic “climax”—the murder of a client by Jeanne. In effect, the stale coffee she makes seems more tragic than the murder she commits. The film compels the viewer to experience domestic time as a bodily event, tied specifically to Jeanne’s body as she moves through her flat making coffee, washing potatoes, mending clothes, and sweeping the floor.

Yet, unlike the intense opposition to domestic entrapment portrayed in Rosler’s performance, in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*—a film which literally identifies a woman through or with her address—Akerman remains ambivalent about domesticity’s potentials to enslave or to empower. This shift reconfigures the binary opposition accorded to the private home and the public sphere. The private domestic sphere is a safe, nurturing space, capable even of soothing over something as scandalous as murder. Nevertheless, Akerman’s strategic swopping of familiar boundaries unsettles the audience. We are left to wonder about the conventional role of the woman in the house, to think of whether familiar domestic rituals may be pernicious, and to fear the dead body on Jeanne’s bed. Instinctively, our idea of home is averse to such disruptions. We are viscerally drawn into Jeanne’s world, into her time, and we begin to worry about “stasis and containment, time and domestic anxiety” (Margulies n.d.), for we become, like the housewife, at the same time, engrossed and restless:

... as the shot goes on, the viewer becomes aware of his/her own body, restless and then again interested. After “reading” the image of a woman washing dishes, one’s attention starts to wander to tiles, to colors, to a rag.

(*Ibid.*)

This is the irony of gendered experiences within the domestic sphere—the women’s bodies are simultaneously invested in, as they are equally resistant to, a spatial politics that preserves the sanctity of familial relations and ideally guarantees the privileges of security and comfort. By “gender” I am referring to a sociocultural/historical construction (masculine and feminine) rather than biological (male and female) differences between bodies (Rendell 2000). Both *Jeanne Dielman* and *20th Century Women* unravel questions of gender and sexuality foundational to home but are persistently muted in mainstream discourse. In these, it is the absence of the heteronormative nuclear family structure that forces us to redraw the boundaries and renovate our perceptions of Jeanne’s flat and Dorothea’s house. Freed from the “regulatory norms of sexual deportment” (Scott 2010, 9), their bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens begin to take on new functions. The “alternative domesticities” (Pilkey, Scicluna, and Gorman-Murray 2015) in these two instances transform home into sites for the unlikely—for Jeanne, it is where necessary work (paid sex) and pleasurable housework (cooking, baking, cleaning) intersect and for Dorothea, it is where collaborative exchange and new social ties are engineered. Through their alternative familial structures, we are confronted with the complex gendered production of home, one which is necessarily constructed “through notions of control, restriction and liberation, visibility and invisibility” (Pilkey et al. 2017a, 3).

The removal of the heteronormative nuclear family as a precondition for home, as these two situations highlight, further accentuates the importance of thinking about home through the “analytical category” of gender (Scott 1986). The feminist historian Joan W. Scott underscores the need for a historicized account of sexual difference such that the dialectical relationships between different bodies constituted by sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and age are recognized. This acknowledgement of difference is opposed to the tactic of seeing home as only constituted by a normative family structure:

... gender is a useful category of analysis because it requires us to historicize the ways sex and sexual difference have been conceived. ... It doesn’t reduce to some known quantity of masculine or feminine, male or female. It’s precisely the particular meanings that need to be teased out of the materials we examine. When gender is an open question about how these meanings are established, what they signify, and in what contexts, then it remains a useful – because critical – category of analysis.

(Scott 2010, 13)

Gender is a significant analytic category because it opens up a priori meanings to question. Scott emphasizes that gender must remain a pliable category of inquiry that rejects essentialist masculine or feminine norms. As an analytic category, gender interrogates the invisible capillaries of power as domestic subjects—both men and women—become bound to specific social roles within a domestic setting: “how issues of power and rights played into definitions of masculinity and femininity; how symbolic structures affected the lives and practices of ordinary people...” (Ibid., 9). In particular, a focus on gender necessitates an inquiry into the relationship between the architecture of the house and the subjective positions available to its occupant. In the case of the housewife, the mother or wife—figures explicitly linked to the foundations of home—how is she constituted by the architecture of the house both in terms of its design as well as its sociocultural symbolic role?

Baydar (2005) similarly argues that questions of gender and sexuality inflected upon domestic architecture raise questions which concern both women and men. The analytic category of gender makes it possible to interrogate domestic subjectivity in its specific and multivalent forms—not simply in terms of normative roles assumed by “women” and “men” at home but thinking through the many unremarked subjects in the domestic realm including women as “aged parents, adult daughters, domestic servants, and single women”, and men as “bachelors, gay men, adult sons, aged fathers, and servants” (Ibid., 33). Given that the heteronormative single-family household

represents a common understanding of domesticity, the inclusion of nonnormative subjects “provides unprecedented opportunities to reconsider not only the boundaries of domesticity, but of the architectural discipline as well” (Ibid., 34). These questions inevitably destabilize architecture by exposing the assumptions and exclusions it makes with regard to production, experience, and agency.

Thus, if, as Colomina (1996) contends, we should understand architecture as a system of representation—not unlike film, drawings, and models—then domestic architecture is inevitably sexualized because it is co-produced by occupants and users whose sexed bodies are culturally and politically constructed. The single-family house is the consequence of a heteronormative marriage contract and the site of traditional family life. In endorsing these relationships, the single-family house subsequently also becomes a space that naturalizes, and privileges, heteronormativity and procreative coupling. “The politics of space are always sexual, even if space is central to the mechanisms of the erasure of sexuality” (Colomina 1996).

The sexualized politics of domestic space has been continuously subjected to feminist architectural critique. Socialist and Marxist feminist architectural historians and practitioners including Dolores Hayden (1981), Gwendolyn Wright (1983), and Alice T. Friedman (2007) critiqued particularly domesticity’s “man-made” spaces (Rendell 2012, 86–8). These feminist historians reorganized the study of modern housing and the domestic sphere by looking at architecture from ground-up. Their research recentered the production of domestic architecture by shifting it from the architect to the occupant. Arguments forefronted the transformative use of domestic through everyday inhabitation and experience. Studies included rationalizing popular household typologies as opposed to focusing on architect-designed attributes, understanding the impact of architecture on domestic practices and familial relationships, rethinking the distribution and responsibility of housework, and reframing the agency of the woman in the house from one of passive consumer to active producer. Likewise, contesting the neat separation of public and private spheres, Heynen and Baydar’s *Negotiating Domesticity* (2005) reframes the production of modern architecture as inherently bound to gender. The volume offers a critical rethinking of architectural narratives and evidence as well as architectural production and reception from the perspectives of domestic experience, use, and engagement. In a more recent interdisciplinary collection, *Sexuality and Gender at Home* (Pilkey et al. 2017b), questions of embodiment—physical, social, cultural, political, economic—become increasingly central to interrogating the sexualized politics of home.

Beyond the Object: Domesticity, Gender, and Affect

The fascination toward the domestic sphere as an analytical category in and of itself has resulted in noteworthy volumes from a multitude of disciplines including geography, ethnography, cultural and social histories, and material culture (Briganti and Mezei 2012; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Miller 2001; Anderson 2000; Reed 1996). Research from these areas has focused on domestic objects, processes, habits, biases, rituals, and the negative impacts of taboos, violence, and natural disaster on domestic existence. The shared argument is that home must be defined through “a continuous process of negotiations, contracts, renegotiations and exchanges” (Brickell 2012b, 226). Thus, domesticity becomes central to spatial and identitarian politics. Geographers and cultural theorists particularly, have advanced domesticity’s significance by mapping its “critical geographies” in relation to power relations (Brickell 2012a; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Blunt 2005a; Blunt and Varley 2004), examining its geopolitical influences manifested through colonization (Blunt 2005b; Gowans 2001; Blunt 1999) or migration (Ahmed 1999), advocating domestic justice for situations of household violence and abuse (Baxter and Brickell 2014; Brickell 2014, 2008) and studying how mundane domestic routines such as cooking and cleaning might empower, or reproduce gender relations (Meah and Peter 2013; Dowling 2008).

In her illuminating essay on home, house, dwelling, and domestic space iterated from an architectural perspective and directed toward a nonarchitecture reader, the architectural historian Lynn Walker concludes that the study of home is inherently implicated in the acknowledgement of various subjectivities and discourses outside of the discipline:

...it is no longer possible to speak of architects' understanding of the home without reference to interdisciplinary approaches and discourses outside architecture. By the same token, the concept of the home, produced at intersections of language, space and social dynamics, is not fixed but changing over time.

(Walker 2002, 831)

Yet, the interdisciplinary conversation necessary to the study of home continues to fracture the limits of the discipline as much as it enriches our understanding of domestic space as something that is both designed and lived. This is perhaps the most difficult and contested aspect, resulting in domesticity still being marginalized in the realm of architectural discourse. In this sense, it is not regarded as an important subject matter in its own right, often seen as peripheral to the associated topics of housing or house design.

Domesticity is also closely linked to the occupant's spontaneous transformation of the architectural interior through usage, habits, and tastes (Jacobs and Cairns 2008; Rendell 1998). As such, discourse on the politics, poetics, and aesthetics of domestic space often find their way into the subdisciplines of interior architecture and interior design. Histories of the modern domestic interior (Sparke et al. 2009; Sparke 2008; Sparke, Martin, and Keeble 2006), theoretical and psychoanalytical discourse of domestic interiors (Rice 2007; Fuss 2004), gendered readings (Colomina 2007; Sanders 2002; Wigley 1992), and theories of interior design (Brooker and Weinthal 2013; Kleinman, Merwood-Salisbury, and Weinthal 2011; Weinthal 2011; Taylor and Preston 2006) are located at the margins of architectural discourse—compelling as architecture's Other but also threatening architecture's assumed autonomy through the evidently interdisciplinary character of the interior, and its complex modes of inhabitation and production. "The (un)doing of 'home' may transgress [conventional] definitions of domesticity, challenge ideas about the ways we occupy space and the ways architects do architecture" (Rendell 1999, 103).

The use of domesticity as analytic category is gaining traction in several pieces of work located in the Asian context. With the home as a site that embeds sentiments of familial piety and national solidarity, the study of domestic space in the Asian milieu is multiply complex. Home does not merely reproduce and naturalize gender relations; it is also a site where imperialist, and, subsequently, nationalist agendas are housed and inscribed as part of an architectural language of progress and modernity (Chee 2013b; Pieris 2013, 2007; Lu 2011). The challenge then becomes how to read against the grain of overwhelming evidence. Indeed, what else can we turn to in order to create a discourse which might include other forms of subjectivities? How do we make sense of other tangible evidence produced through domestic occupation that are left out of documented policies and proliferating state-sanctioned archives?

In his interpretation of Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of abstract space, the political economist Japhy Wilson (2013) argues that Lefebvre's critique of abstract space is rooted in a critique of modern spatial practice, one that is not just driven by capital but argues against a space of disalienation dictated by technocratic rationality. In the way home is represented and conceived as ultimately serving the nation, this iteration derives from an abstract and homogeneous space linking perceived communities and calculated desires of progress and productivism. It is also a space that discourages self-actualization or individual investment. Lefebvre's conception of a differential space in a postproductivist economy is particularly compelling for rethinking the relationship between domesticity (spatial practice of lived experiences), the architecture of dwelling (representational

space of design), and the ideological notion of home (representation of technocratic space). How can domesticity be employed as an analytic category to trace the unsaid but sensed?

In tandem with efforts to trace narratives of domestic space through lived experiences, the role of affect and affective evidence are increasingly important. Affective evidence is particularly resonant in the domestic sphere, given its occupants' emotional and relational investments in such spaces. Affect is a relational intensity transmitted between objects, spaces, and people (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Massumi 1995). Unlike emotion which "happens inside and tends toward outside expression", affect is exteriorized and prepersonalized, making it "relational and transformative" (Flatley 2008, 12). The psychologist, Silvan Tomkins (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 33–74), argues that affect has its own specificity and is not derived from elements of "cognition" such as belief, thought, or choice. Rather, affect occurs within an assemblage, a network, or a system. In architectural terms, affect may be more appropriately described as a sensed feeling between us and the space we find ourselves in. Indeed, affect is atmospheric, pointing us to "something in the air". Affect in architecture is, however, not restricted to the architectural space itself, but that which comes into effect "in the middle" (Ballantyne 2007, 85–6) or in the midst of a constellation comprising architecture, the objects within it, and the people who encounter both architecture and objects. "Affects need objects to come into being", and hence, affects are "always experienced in relation to an object or objects" (Flatley 2008, 16). Thus, the material quality and atmospheric sense of a space—an intensity we can perceive bodily, but perhaps not register cognitively yet—is where affect is ultimately located. Affective evidence becomes an important means of unpacking domesticity particularly where there are obstacles to accessing knowledge because of difficult circumstances including war, conflict, governmental embargoes, and individual censorship.

Looking at the postwar political entity of Northern Cyprus, which was invaded by Turkey in 1974, the anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) discusses the affective spaces and stories discharged by the material domestic landscape of the Turkish-Cypriot homes and their scarred occupants. Her research is based on the hidden histories and unspoken contemporary stories of the Turkish-Cypriot house—an unhomely space of guilt—detected through affective evidence "produced and transmit(ted) ... relationally" between the current occupants and their expropriated houses (2009, 14). These domestic environments and their material objects are entities embroiled with "politics and law in the most intimate spheres of existence: around people's most private and personal belongings" (2012, 179). Navaro-Yashin traces the domestic unease through a close reading of the occupants' household routines, patterns of use, habits, and reactions toward household objects looted from the original Cypriot owners. Her ethnographical methodology combines the subjective (occupant) and the objective (objects and space) to extend a story repressed by Turkish institutional archives. For Navaro-Yashin, the affective is inseparable from both subjects and objects. She argues that affective evidence produces situated knowledges, particularly accounting for "the merging of the forces, energies, and affective potentialities of human beings with their natural, built, and material environment" (2012, 27).

The continuum between what is sensed, what is lived, and what is imaginable through domesticity is key to taking apart the officially documented "representational space" of home. This methodology is extended by architectural historian Anoma Pieris (2017) in her study of minority Tamil homes abandoned by their residents during the Sri Lankan civil war in 1983. Pieris develops an intimate sociospatial architectural ethnography which relooks at the affective materiality of three suburban home in ruins. Interviewing two generations of Tamil female householders about their struggle with self-exile and their relationship with their abandoned natal homes, she offers affective-subjective portraits of domestic architecture that critiques studies of Sri Lankan dwellings premised on aesthetic, functional, and formal qualities. These exilic homes are "interpreted as artefacts that are affectively and performatively emplaced" (2017, 16), where the exiled Tamil

women enact a “private resilience” (ibid.) by making “war-related adaptations and compromises” to their dwellings (2017, 17). For Pieris, there is a necessity to read between the lines of both objective and subjective evidence. The role of affect—what is palpable and perceivable yet has no cognitive form or language of articulation—becomes the outcome of Pieris’ architectural discourse around these war-torn houses.

In another context, the architectural historian Izumi Kuroishi (1998) highlights how the field-work drawings of peasant houses by Japanese architect Kon Wajiro (1888–1973) constructs affective lived evidence—a series of situated architectural-ethnographical document not seen before. Beginning in 1910, Kon began to document peasant houses and their way of life in rural Japan. His intention was to collect and preserve information of these traditional cultures as well as to use such material to steer government policies in these areas. Kon’s visual research method involved the production of detailed drawings which depicted not only the interior space but also all the objects—tools, utensils, clothing and shoes, furniture, and other belongings—found in that space. It resulted in lively, expressively, and vividly detailed drawings that, according to Kon, would make audible to the viewer, the voices of the house’s occupants (Kuroishi 2011, 100). Kon’s drawings portrayed domestic space as an entangled phenomenon where architecture, furniture, belongings, usage patterns, and occupancy habits became inseparable (Figure 14.1). These drawings also advanced Kon’s philosophy of architecture as a “container for everyday life”. Their affective capacity is rendered in the excesses of transient and trivial domestic details. Moving away from normative architectural representation, such detail brings Kon’s drawings closer to the genre of filmic storyboards. Through these drawings, we perceive space through its residues of movements, habits, and identities. The careful inventory of key household objects also forces upon the viewer a relational engagement not just with the objects but also the personal histories tied to them. To this end, Kuroishi argues that Kon’s excessive visual displays “expressed [the objects’] imaginative qualities and his consciousness about the spatiality between objects and interior space, inviting viewers to empathize with the unseen owners and their movements” (*Ibid.*, 115).

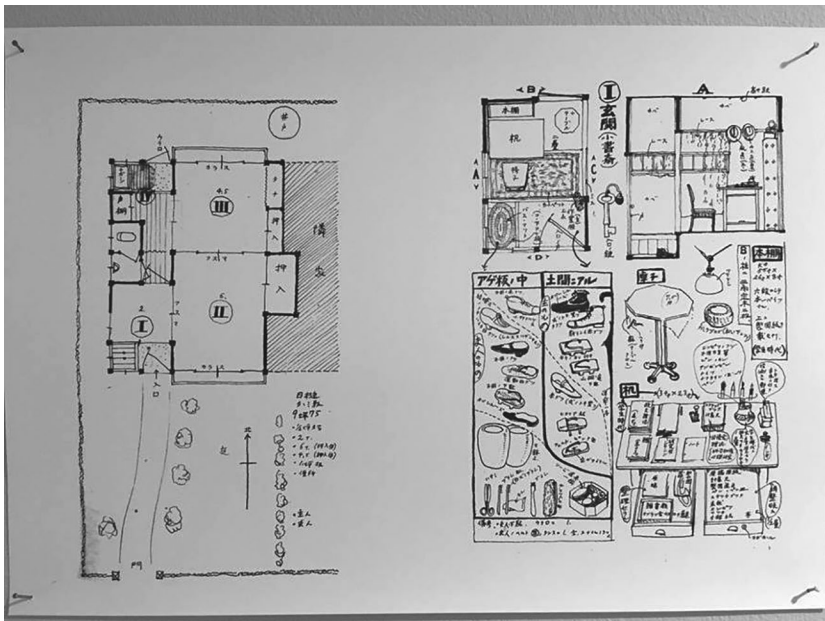


Figure 14.1 Drawings by Kon Wajiro exhibited at Kinokuniya Shinjyuku in 1927, capturing a family’s possessions in the living room and a plan of the house (Courtesy of Kogakuin University Library).

My own recent research explores the gendered biases of domestic architecture in Singapore. Public housing policy in Singapore is outwardly proheteronormative family (Oswin 2010). Singles may purchase smaller one-bedroom subsidized public housing flats in non-matured estates or resale flats from the open market, only upon reaching the age of 35 years, coincidentally also the critical age for female biological fertility. With almost a third of the national population now choosing singlehood, the issue of preferential housing for nuclear families is a pressing one. Yet, how does one contemplate the issues of social inclusion, spatial justice, and gender when the architectural discourse of nationalized public housing does not recognize these terms? It is from within this academic “road block” that I conceptualized the architectural essay film *03-FLATS* (Chee 2017; Lei 2014). The film—a collaboration with the award-winning Singaporean filmmaker, Lei Yuan Bin—revolves around the domestic lives of three single women in Singapore public housing units. Edited from over 200 hours of footage and eight months of filming, *03-FLATS* is an affective portrait of public housing visualized from the interiors of the flats (Figure 14.2). Consider these three scenes: A woman moves slowly between her kitchen and her bedroom. The flat is quiet as she works on her old sewing machine. Another woman makes large charcoal drawings in her living room. She fills every surface of her flat with collectibles. A third woman entertains her friends in the cramped corridor outside her flat at the end of the Muslim Ramadan month. She is dressed in her finest clothes. These public housing interiors are only three among the thousands found in Singapore, a country famed for its mass housing program, the Housing and Development Board (HDB). The HDB flat is synonymous with the nuclear family. Yet these three women are neither mother nor wife. They live alone.

03-FLATS is an experiment in architectural representation. It questions architecture’s propensity to remove affect and life from architectural representation. Its impetus is the rich material offered by domesticity, which architectural discourse on Singaporean public housing has ultimately disregarded, neutralized, or repressed. Contrary to current practice where public housing is spoken through the planner or the architect’s language, what happens to the discourse of public housing when it is experienced through a domestic perspective? The focus on domesticity inevitably forefronts the milieu of public housing. “Milieu” refers to a surrounding environment which impinges on the object and describes architecture as a noninsular object. Architecture is always in the middle of something. In *03-FLATS*, we find public housing in the milieu of gendered



Figure 14.2 Photograph taken during the filming of *03-FLATS* (2014), showing occupancy of a Singapore public housing interior (courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin).

bodies marked by age, sexuality, ethnicity and class, and the multiply complex domestic situations of the three women. Domesticity is studied here not so much because it is contained within the architecture of public housing and so must be given attention; I would argue, rather, that it must be addressed because it gives presence to architecture. In other words, *03-FLATS* contends that domesticity gives public housing architecture its form. As a consequence, the architecture of public housing is portrayed not as anterior to occupation, but its architecture comes into being as the consequence of someone living in it. Through domesticity and moving beyond block upon homogeneous block, public housing gains an identifiable identity.

In the months spent thinking about the narrative structure of the film, I was especially struck by how the filmic image constantly juxtaposed architecture with something else. Architecture was the subject, but in the film, it became the background. Architecture only surged to the foreground through the women's embodied actions. Spaces for gathering, sleeping, and cooking were understood through household routines, their repetitions, and their durations. Perceptions of physical scale, size, proximity, as well as ideologies, desires, and anxieties were played out in the bodily routines of each woman, who was in turn, marked by her class, race, ethnicity, and age. The filmic encounter made the architecture of public housing inseparable from its milieu. It made public housing incredibly difficult to study as a rarefied object. Yet, the possibility of thinking about public housing simultaneously as *both* foreground and background also changes the limits of its knowledge. Rather than abstract policy, the film underscores the importance of rethinking public housing through lived, embodied occupancy. And again here, as Lynn Walker argued previously, the gap between domesticity and architecture continues to be challenged and persists as a problem.

Conclusion

The relationship between architecture, domesticity, and gender is simultaneously enduring and fraught. Architecture is a system of othering—it excludes and represses everything else which is not part of the discipline. Not coincidentally, domesticity and gender are located outside architecture's legitimized boundaries. "Outside architecture", the feminist philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz (2001, xvii), reminds us "is always inside bodies, sexualities, history, culture, nature—all those others [architecture] seeks to exclude but which are the constitutive edges, the boundaries of its operations". If the canon of architectural history has privileged particular agents and processes, relocating domesticity and gender within architectural discourse implicitly addresses the shortcomings of a patriarchally biased historiography by reconsidering the contributions, outcomes, and impacts of other marginalized agents.

At the same time, feminists continue to question, debate, or reject the domestic realm because its ideological frame can be deployed to subjugate women, limiting their contribution within traditional familial roles. Yet, because domesticity highlights the productive/nonproductive processes which go on to constitute the sense of home—including the production of identity, security, comfort, belonging, and the negotiations necessary to maintain the status quo—domesticity is a double-edged tool, both limiting and emancipatory in its different guises. More significantly, the gendering of domesticity highlights the politics of embodied actions, opens up unremarked areas of agency, as well as exposing the biases and norms placed upon specific gendered household relationships. Certainly, domesticity's shapeshifting abilities—on the one hand, explicitly linked to safeguarding status quo notions of family and home and on the other hand, implicitly critical in unravelling the very same protocols of status quo maintenance—asserts an incredibly pliant position within architectural discourse.

It is also this ambiguous position that affords domesticity and its gendered overtones some critical space within Asian architectural discourse's tightly managed and essentialized narratives,

as well as its antipolemic arguments on home and gender. If home is wedded to particular architectural claims of self-identity and belonging, then the usage of gendered domesticity as an analytic architectural category might begin to take such assumptions apart. In doing so, domesticity makes contingent the architectures of dwelling, housing, and home. Consequently, entering the discourse of dwelling and home through the conduits of domesticity and gender requires more than a change of perspective. The shift entails rigorous questioning of analytical tools, modes of evidence, attendant agencies, and their voices. The inclusion of domesticity and gender enable often idealized and abstract entities of “home” or “housing” to reconsider lived experience and occupancy as relevant to the production of situated knowledge around these subjects.

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