

INTRODUCTION: DOMESTICITY + HOME
Reframing Narratives, Reforming Boundaries

by Lilian Chee

Though they are used sometimes interchangeably, the proximate relationship between 'home' and 'domesticity' is, at the same time, obvious and problematic. These difficulties have to do with the narrowing of both terms with a sense of security, predictability and hence, fixity, a consequence of the incessant repetition of spaces and routines connected with the act of dwelling. Yet, how are these terms manifested discursively and materially in architecture?

Home is the locus of domesticity. Home is where the ideologies (concepts), practices (rituals/habits) and material (objects) manifestations of domesticity are realised. In fact, home is an intensely political site. Contrary to common perception, home is not a fixed and stable location. It is shaped by inclusions, exclusions and contestations, that is to say, it is formed by specific biases towards peoples, objects, and practices.

While home may be considered a 'symbolic container expressing the identities of its inhabitants as well as conveying more general cultural assumptions and beliefs about the world',¹ it is equally also 'a site of agency and a site of mobility, rather than simply a symbolic system that acts as the backdrop or blueprint for practice and agency'.² This means that inhabitation of any space with the intent of domesticating it as 'home' involves a two-way process: the house or space is being changed by the individual, as much as the individual is mutually transformed by his/her space of dwelling.

Home is the site where domestic spatial imaginations covering a wide range — nation, community, family and individual — find their expressions. There is reciprocity between one's own home to each of these sites, as spatial imaginaries of nation, community, family and individual are often reproduced in the domestic sphere. 'In other words, home-spaces and home-making practices are intimately bound together over a range of scales and are closely shaped by the exercise of power and resistance and by what is imagined as "foreign" or unhomely'.³ At the same time, home is also

influenced by global flows of capital brought about by tourism, the setting up of multinational corporations, migration and the influx of foreign labour. Notwithstanding these physical factors, home is always subject to local cultures, including ethnic beliefs, mythologies, and rituals. Home is also personal. It is 'a surrogate for, and extension of, the self and the body', crucial to the formation of 'self-identity as the persistence of personal memory'.⁴

Home is thus both a physical location and a set of emotions/ideologies/feelings. It is the *relationship* which exists between material and imaginative realms and practices. It is neither just a place, nor just an emotion, but crucially the intersection of both physical and emotive aspects working together. In this sense, home does not simply exist. It must be made. The process of home-making is domesticity. Domesticity perpetuates the relationship between the physical and the imaginary realms of home. Domestic practices create (through the collection of material comforts) and maintain (through rules and practices e.g. housekeeping, household etiquette) the idealised notion of home. Domesticity is also a reflection of social relationships and hierarchies, for example, how the family is structured — whether it is patriarchal or matrilineal, whether it is extended or nuclear, whether it is heterosexual or otherwise.

More politicised than the term 'home', domesticity involves gender, sexuality, labour, class, ethnicity and taste. 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 visualise, negotiate and realise ambitions for comfort, security, privacy and independence provided through the agency of architecture.

The domestic realm implies:

(...) spatial arrangements in which certain practices of reproduction (children as well as certain modes of

production) are situated. As a primary site at which modernity is manufactured and made manifest, the domestic serves as a regulative norm that refigures conceptions of the family from a largely temporal organisation of kinship into a spatially manifest entity.⁵

Domesticity is also marked by an amazing array of material objects ranging from soft furnishings, practical items of everyday use, technological apparatus such as refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, useless knick knacks, to souvenirs and gifts collected from family holidays, to sentimental possessions connoting ideas of hearth and home. While the cult of domesticity was developed as a nineteenth-century European idea arising from the separation of home from work in the aftermath of industrialised labour, its longevity as a spatial and material production has persisted beyond these historical and geographic boundaries. In line with this development, the assumptions connected with such a concept need to be renovated, or indeed completely dismantled, so as to remain relevant, if also, critical.

Architectural and art historians including Hilde Heynen, Gülsüm Baydar, Dolores Hayden, Gwendolyn Wright, Alice Friedman, Beatriz Colomina and Christopher Reed have done important work in this respect by both fielding marginal subjects as well as exposing modes of inhabitation which contest the norms.⁶ What these writings share in common is their question of the gendering of architecture in terms of its conception, production, occupation, and interpretation. By this, I mean that the naturalised notions of middle or upper class domestic space, designed by a (male) architect, governed by traditional hierarchies of private and public quarters, and passively consumed by the woman of the household, are called into question. If domesticity is automatically associated with feminine consumption, how can it be critical to architectural production and discourse today given that the terms of how we dwell have changed radically? No longer are 'families' constituted solely from heterosexual coupling and procreation. And if, as architectural theorist Mark Wigley attests, 'marriage is already spatial' — the condition

for 'building a house' — what then happens to the material manifestations of home and our readings of it, if this contract is now altered?⁷

In her insightful essay, architectural historian Gülsüm Baydar brings up the critical edge of 'domesticity' as one inherently bound to a politics of space centred around notions of sexuality. However, Baydar emphasises how domesticity has been limited to discourses surrounding those of femininity and women in the home, when in fact 'much work remains to be done on the layering of *both* female and male voices and the production of feminine and masculine subjectivities in domestic environments' given that 'the relation of women to femininity and man to masculinity' are themselves gross essentialisations.⁸ She questions the underlying bases for architecture's definition of domesticity by asking whether we can imagine domestic space outside what is routinely reproduced and ingrained in our cultures, that is, 'to see and act out the materiality of space differently from what we are trained to do (...) outside the dictates of standard architectural types and given choreographies of single-family households'.⁹

Developing on Baydar's challenge to see domesticity beyond its traditional regulation, hierarchies and control over how space is materialised, used and perceived, the essays in this book develop the sense of domesticity as parallel to what Henri Lefebvre has written about the cutting edge quality of the banal and everyday. Here, citing Lefebvre and replacing 'the everyday' with 'domesticity', 'Domesticity is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden'.¹⁰ The six authors focus on modes of occupancy, the contextual agency of each place governed by their micro-geographies and the underlying larger political and social agendas. They discuss how different domestic spaces are manifested out of these circumstances — some by striking physical materiality, others by persistence of imagination or habit. The issue of the gendered body is addressed directly by a few essays, but the general line of questioning in all the writings echo Baydar's provocations.

Writing from a relatively new terrain, the essays engage the notion of domesticity set specifically within the geographical bounds of Southeast Asia.

They present various critical perspectives on this theme as a theoretically binding agent, albeit attached to different vehicles of study, as 'home' is ultimately taken apart in each essay, moving through, and beyond, the 'family' house. All are concerned with a mixture of theoretical and empirical research that provide for sound scholarly expositions of this theme. Domesticity is the discursive starting point in these works, yet the discussions extend and offset domestic ideals against mutable and diverse sites of application.

Two sets of narratives are broached in the forthcoming chapters. They recount the nation's rendition, as well as personal narratives of domesticity and domestic sites. The first set of essays by Kenneth Koh, Melany Park and Jolene Lee examine how the physical and imaginative construction of 'home' intervenes and disrupts national narratives, as landscapes and dwelling spaces are appropriated or misappropriated through relocation, reconfiguration and fragmentation. The second set by Hui Lian Lee, Dawn Lim and Mien Huei Yong move closer to individuated responses of home and hearth.

In light of Singapore's vigorous acts of land reclamation and urban renewal, ground can be seen as a geomorphic entity that is endlessly shaped in accordance with a national vision. However, Kenneth Koh's essay reflects upon the anachronistic existence of Chinese burial grounds on the island state, arguing that it is a space of otherness contingent upon topological laws of geomancy which are bound to the real 'lie of the land'. In this instance, a contestation ensues between land as a neutral resource for future home and nation building, and the landscape as a cultural entity. Koh's piece also deftly negotiates the real pressure on space demanded by both the living and the dead, an escalating problem which has been neatly resolved by the state through its systematised clearing of old graveyards and allocation of multi-storeyed burial niches in crematoria bearing uncanny resemblance to the state's high-rise public housing blocks.

Tracing the temporary homes and itinerant production sites of the avant-garde Singaporean art collective, The Artists Village (TAV), between 1988 and 2000, Melany Park posits that the collective's creative production was intimately bound up with their ideologies of 'home'. However, this

connection was complicated by TAV's antagonistic relationship to the state, who also controlled the collective's sites of occupation. These ranged between rural village settlement, an abandoned warehouse at the city fringes, and ultimately, the complete dismantling of the group as an entity without a shared home. In each instance, the production of art was reactive to the circumstances of the collective's dwelling situation — shifting from one of security (the village settlement) to one of utter dispossession. At the same time, the collective found increasing recognition for their work as they moved from rural to urban sites. This contradictory position is reflected in their shifting and sometimes contrary ideologies of 'home' — at times clashing, and at other moments in alignment, with a national vision.

In her essay 'Land Imagined, Nation Cited/Sited', Jolene Lee discusses the relationship between national ambitions for 'home' played out through the annual celebrations of Singapore's National Day Parades, and their anticipated as well as spontaneous meanings, when these parades take on different locations across the island state. Taking on three Parade sites — the *Padang* (a colonial legacy giving onto a generous expanse of green right in the middle of Singapore's civic district), the country's ubiquitous public housing estates and the now defunct National Stadium — the essay discusses how narratives of 'home' are played out in relation to an overarching trope of the Singapore story, a teleological narrative premised on physical and mental endurance as a measure of economic success. Lee argues that these three sites are not just neutral backdrops but in fact politicised locations for such a narrative to develop.

The second set of essays open with Hui Lian Lee's alternative historical appraisal of Singapore's early iconic public housing scheme, the Singapore Improvement Trust or SIT flats. Piecing together lived experiences and accounts from archival sources, oral history documents, supplemented by on-site interviews and personal observations, Lee reconstructs an anecdotal history of the SIT flats. The essay takes a bottom-up approach. It forefronts the oft-ignored anecdotal fragment as crucial architectural evidence, something often repressed because it betrays what is risky, or taboo. In doing

so, the alternative history of the SIT flats comes close to Baydar's advocate for an other imagination of the domestic realm where the normative subjects (mistresses of rich men, war prisoners and a mad woman) and spaces (sites of escape, incarceration, torture and taboo) associated with such homes are broken down and reconstituted in ways which often confront what is perceived as 'normal'.

In 'Spectres and Spectacles', Dawn Lim explores the idea of '*hauntedness*' as a performative, rather than essentialistic, spatial characteristic of the 'haunted house'. As the notion of the haunted house is generally associated with the 'ghostly', Lim interrogates whether this phenomenon needs to be fundamentally grounded in space — a physical setting or a particular spatial environment — before it is able to manifest itself. Between the existence of a commonplace house and the point at which it becomes haunted, how does this object of familiarity — a home — become so feared? In this instance, domestic space takes on the atmosphere of the macabre and the unworldly.

The final essay by Mien Huei Yong looks at the issue of domesticity in the context of the turn-of-the-century Chinese businessman and patriarch Cheong Fatt Tze's mansion, or better known as the Blue Mansion, in the heritage city of Penang in neighbouring Malaysia. The Blue Mansion, now converted into a boutique hotel, was once a stately house presided over by the powerful patriarch who ran the house strictly following rules of geomancy and observance of Chinese customs and taboos. Yong discusses the gendered formation of the house as it vacillates between the masculine and feminine voices and subjectivities of the patriarch and his wives. Through a gendered reading of the space, Yong proposes that the mansion is located 'between monumentality and domesticity', as the architecture is continually reproduced through its changing users and their habits.

While the essays converge in their preoccupation with domestic space, domesticity, and the shifting concepts of home, it becomes clear that this field of study is much more complex and diversified when the conventional boundaries and techniques applied by the architectural discipline to domesticity's subjects, subjectivities, hierarchies and spaces are challenged.

It also becomes apparent that the domestic realm is not necessarily a sequestered site, or indeed polemically opposed to notions of the public. Instead, domesticity is both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time, and implicates both private and public domains. It is a microcosm of the world as we collectively know and perceive, but also a space where the individual is still able to freely invent other new worlds which can radically change what is collectively known and perceived.

Notes

¹ Hilde Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions', Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 21.

² Daniel Miller, 'Behind Closed Doors', Daniel Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 12. Cited in Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity', p. 21.

³ Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 188.

⁴ Philip Tabor, 'Striking Home: The Telematic Assault on Identity', Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 218.

⁵ Rosemary Marangoly George, 'Recycling: Long Routes to and from Domestic Fixes', Rosemary Marangoly George (ed.), *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁶ See for example, Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982); Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); Alice Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992); Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

⁷ Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, p. 336.

⁸ Gülsüm Baydar, 'Figures of wo/man in Contemporary Architectural Discourse', Heynen

and Baydar (eds), *Negotiating Domesticity*, p. 31. Emphasis added.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (eds), *Architecture and the Everyday* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p. 34.