

SECTION I

Reimagining Domesticity in *03-FLATS*: Single Women and Singapore Public Housing

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From Written Text to Film

No longer write about people's lives but only [about] what goes on between people in space [...] like colors and sounds.

(Godard 1980: 145)

The opening scene (Figure 1) in the film *O3-FLATS* (Lei and Chee 2014) shows a young woman in a cramped apartment kitchen overflowing with all kinds of household paraphernalia – pots, pans, hangers for laundry that are being hung to dry above where she stands – and keepsakes vying for attention on every available surface. The next scene (Figure 2) cuts to a different flat where another woman is cooking in her kitchen. She is dancing and singing to a Malay song on the radio. A table in the foreground holds a bronze fish ornament and a vase of artificial flowers. The overhead cabinets are filled with crystal crockery. The subsequent scene (Figure 3) is shot in a kitchen of almost similar layout to the second kitchen. This third kitchen is however bare and pristine. The wall tiles appear to be installed in the 1970s. A much older woman of slight frame has her back to the audience. A gust of wind blows from an open window. The older woman places a large piece of cardboard to stop the wind from extinguishing her cooker. The view from the open window shows row upon row of gravestones, and beyond that, a train speeds past in the far distance.

O3-FLATS is a feminist architectural essay film that I conceptualized, researched, and co-developed in collaboration with award-winning Singapore filmmaker Lei Yuan Bin. The core function of the essay film is experiential in nature, in that it primarily mediates an experience of 'the world in the full intellectual and phenomenological sense of the word' (Corrigan 2011: 35). Through the essay film, the audience is engaged as active participants in sensing and thinking about the world around them:

The viewing subject inhabits partially the unstable subject position foregrounded in the film (as if, figuratively, a home movie) and partially the expanding position of participating in other ideas and worlds (as if, figuratively, a documentary).

(Corrigan 2011: 35)



Figure 1: Young woman in her cramped kitchen overflowing with household paraphernalia. Stills from *03-FLATS*, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, concept and research by Lilian Chee, 2014.



Figure 2: Woman cooking and singing in her kitchen. Stills from *03-FLATS*, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, concept and research by Lilian Chee, 2014.



Figure 3: Older woman in her bare and pristine kitchen, facing a cemetery. Stills from *03-FLATS*, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, concept and research by Lilian Chee, 2014.

Through this study of *O3-FLATS*, I will discuss the paucities in architectural representations of domestic space, and in particular focus on representations of Singaporean public housing, a state-sponsored programme that has been relatively well documented and frequently lauded for its success (Chua 1991). This chapter takes a critical view that its existing architectural representations have largely emphasized the close correlation between formalist strategies with social and ethnic nationalist cohesion policies. This mode of representation undermines a discussion of how public housing may still fulfil a social role in an Asian setting where once unshakeable institutions such as those of family, nation and gendered roles in both contexts are gradually being challenged.

Going beyond the current convention of seeing and thinking of public housing as an urban-scaled project privileging typological, technological and planning innovations, *O3-FLATS* is an epistemological probe that observes how an affective architectural landscape unfolds within a homogeneous built environment. The film follows the quotidian existence of three single women within the interiorized boundaries of their respective flats. It is structured more or less around their diurnal household routines. Through the repetitive domestic practices of cleaning, cooking, eating and resting, and the occasional practices of home decoration, creative work and socializing, the film reveals extraordinary instances of creativity within over-determined and controlled architectural, spatial and social frameworks. I have used the term 'feminist' to describe the essay film because it not only forefronts the study of single women occupancy within a family-centric public housing programme, but also because the film shifts the focus of public housing from a top-down approach towards one which reconstructs the experience and agency of this typology from an intimate and interiorized perspective.

The first part of the chapter discusses the architectural and political imports of Singaporean public housing. The second part explicates the role of film as a critical medium for re-engaging the co-production of architectural space from within the interior. It raises the disjunctions that exist between a neutralized architectural representation of public housing (both in text and image), and its critical portrayals within the island state's independent filmic productions. The latter's representation of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats produces instead an ambivalent space that jars with the gender-neutral and nondescript representations frequently identified with the HDB. This representation is further perpetuated in countless architectural publications that objectify the architecture, separating it from occupation and experience (Pomeroy 2012; Tan and Wong 2008; Wong 2004; Chang 2000).

By incorporating a temporal dimension, the filmic representations of public housing dismantle static notions of this housing typology. The opening epigraph in this chapter from Jean-Luc Godard underscores the importance of visualizing what is affective, in Godard's case by registering colours and sounds in the spaces between to tell a story that transcends the obvious. Echoing this, I wish to show that it is from the representation of the flats' interior spaces, and from film's capacity to tease out an affective and material domestic space, that the two concepts – 'home' and 'housing' – may be critically taken apart and questioned.

One Block, One People, One Nation, One Singapore

Singapore's public housing project is intricately tied to narratives of nationhood. As Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong (2010) attests, 'two generations of Singaporeans have grown up in HDB flats. Public housing helped to mould our unique national identity and collective experience as Singaporeans. It created and shaped our communities, and provided the foundation for our social stability and economic growth'.

Founded in 1960, the HDB was tasked with solving Singapore's dire housing shortage (Wong and Yeh 1985). Without proper housing facilities, as many as fifteen families cramped into accommodation meant for a single household (Seow 1965: 18); overcrowding, non-existent sanitary provisions and poor hygiene plagued those who flocked to live and work in the city core. In a 1947 survey, British administrators declared these inhospitable living quarters as 'one of the world's worst slums [...] a disgrace to a civilized community' (Yuen 2007: 16). It was also a cesspool for infectious diseases like tuberculosis. With the founding of the HDB and the imposition of the Land Acquisition Act in 1966, spacious, modern and hygienic flats were efficiently rolled out for the growing population. The backbone of the housing crisis was broken in five years and resolved within a decade of HDB's inception.

Nevertheless, public housing is ideologically constructed as much as it is a social instrument of reform. In 1965, Singapore had just separated from Malaysia. Consequently, a housing project where every family was offered an opportunity to buy in, became a viable national effort to transform each citizen into a committed stakeholder within the newly independent country (Chua 1991: 315). At the same time, the regimented modernist housing blocks became the symbol of a new age. Its International Style aesthetic radically departed from the colonial architecture which had once stood for progress. In *Berita Singapura: A New Look at Housing*, the 1967 television broadcast celebrated the arrival of these modern accommodations. The narrator announces 'This is how the new Singapore will look: multi-storeyed blocks of apartment houses [...] Singapore is acquiring the one hallmark of a great civilized community: magnificent buildings plus comfortable workers' housing'.

Here, the HDB is seen as emblematic of the architecture of a 'great civilized community'. And as a 'civilizing' instrument, the architecture of public housing was (and continues to be) a complex mechanism. Acting as a policy instrument, strict ownership conditions were imposed to regulate and engineer population growth and ethnic distribution. For example in 1973, in the state's bid to control 'genetically-superior offspring' (Heng and Devan 1992: 345), women of lower educational status applying for housing, were mandated to have no more than two children, while one of the spouses of couples which included a female work permit holder married to a Singaporean had to agree to voluntary sterilization after the birth of their second child, or be prepared to give up their rights to public housing (Tai 1988: 114; Perry et al. 1997: 246).

Today, the standard requirement to qualify for a flat is the evidence of a marriage certificate or an agreement that marriage will ensue before the purchase of a flat is finalized.

The ownership of HDB flats by single parents, siblings and unmarried individuals is restricted by stringent guidelines. Married couples are given large housing subsidies of up to SGD 80,000 (Housing and Development Board 2015a), depending on eligibility criteria including employment and income-level conditions. If they choose to stay within two kilometres from their parents' homes, they may be eligible for a range of priority schemes that would also improve their balloting chances, including the 'Multi-Generation Priority Scheme' or the 'Married Child Priority Scheme' (Housing and Development Board 2015a, 2015d). It is thought that extended family proximity would promote closeness and encourage filial piety towards the older generations. Ethnic mix is also closely managed in each block, guaranteeing that a certain percentage of ethnic minority is maintained at all times (Lai 1997).

Apart from these public policies, social policies were also introduced in the 1960s, with the onset of the nation-wide high-rise housing programme (Housing and Development Board 1989). Pamphlets were distributed to instruct the masses on all manners of everyday conduct – how to flush water closets, why not to dispose of litter from the higher floors of the housing block, how to befriend neighbours, why it is wrong to abuse public areas such as the lifts where people were sometimes caught urinating. The sociologist Chua Beng-Huat (1997: 140–42) argues that public housing is framed within an 'explicit ideological language', intent on defining a particular model of the Singaporean citizen. In addition, the HDB's position as a state-controlled operation allows it to utilize what Michel Foucault (2004: 26) describes as a web-like power system that entangles other state-related institutions of finance, economy, citizenship and civic morality, to both define and normalize the heterosexual and procreative Singaporean family as the basic unit of the nation (Chua 1997: 129). Hence, to borrow the refrains of a popular Singaporean patriotic anthem: one block, one people, one nation, one Singapore (Monteiro and Aitchison 1990).

Without polarizing the tensions that mark public housing stakeholdership, *03-FLATS*' visual representational strategy is as even-handed as it can be. It strove to show the rich and eventful lives of the single women as well as to highlight the inevitability of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism': the promise of a 'good life' backed up by high standards of efficacy and hygiene, a strong patriotic sentiment amongst public housing stakeholders, and opportunities as well as inequalities which underpin such privileges. My ambition was for the essay film to work as an archival document and a feminist political statement. It visualizes the politics and poetics of three single women living alone in public housing. The question this project posed was not whether its conclusions could be applied universally. Instead, the situational interpretations derived from viewing hundreds of hours of footage allowed for the accumulation and analysis of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1977) about the domestic routines taking place in the three flats. These routines and their deviations, traced over many hours of observational filming, offered insights into what these women valued about their domestic environments, and how they chose to be creative in the making of their own lives. Such creativity included making small variations in banal household chores such as cooking or cleaning, or creating new pockets of time and space for more unusual domestic projects such as sewing, decorating or entertaining. In addition, there is also an understanding that although these descriptions might be used to generalize the perceptions and meanings of public housing amongst similar groups



Figure 4: Each occupant negotiates, deconstructs, preserves and transforms her own space. Stills from *03-FLATS*, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, concept and research by Lilian Chee, 2014.

of single women occupants, the project acknowledges that such meanings are situated contextually, and will continue to evolve with the occupants as they experience different life stages and circumstances. Such meanings are equally co-constructed by myself as the researcher, and subsequently by various audiences who are also contextually located, and similarly evolve.

Though some may read the film as primarily ethnographical, the primary focus of *03-FLATS* is on how space and architecture may be produced through domestic life. It follows how the three women engage, negotiate, deconstruct, reconstruct, preserve or transform their home environments (Figure 4). Unlike ethnographic films that aim to record the context impartially, *03-FLATS* is both representational and performative – it archives the domestic existence of three women and records the spaces and practices in their homes as much as it strives to project a critical perspective. The film's mode of address as an architectural essay enables this two-way engagement.

Timothy Corrigan (2011) defines the 'essay film' as a cross-disciplinary genre that has at its core, the mechanics of an 'essay'. Citing Theodore Adorno's article 'The essay as form' (1984), Corrigan (2011: 23) argues that the intention of the essay film in expressing concepts and experiences makes it particularly 'concerned with what is blind in its objects'. The power of the essay film, Corrigan (2011: 13, 14) explains, lies in its dialogical structure that encompasses 'a personal point of view as a public experience' which subsequently incites a 'process of thinking':

Straddling fiction and nonfiction, news reports and confessional autobiography, documentaries and experimental film, they are, first, practices that undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgment within the complexity of experience.

(2011: 4)

The essay film crucially embeds the private self within a public experience, wherein the 'many-layered activities of a personal point of view' (Corrigan 2011: 13) are reconfigured to yield 'different experiential encounters or experiential concepts linking subjectivity and a public domain' (Corrigan 2011: 6). *03-FLATS* doubly frames the 'private self': first, through the three single women homeowners whose subjectivity have been marginalized in a family-oriented domestic environment, and second, through the 'self' of the researcher/filmmaker, whose point of view is ultimately scrutinized by a public who may have been 'blind' to the normalized biases within a state-sponsored domestic entitlement.

Domesticity is largely unremarked upon and significantly absent in architectural discourse (Heynen 2005; Baydar 2005; Chee 2017; Chee and Seng 2017). Thus, feminist politics are particularly instrumental in committing how this essay film might itself create a theory of architectural domesticity (Troiani and Kahn 2016) which merges aspects of design, history, biography, gender and policy. In this instance, the processes and decisions taken during the making of the film become key parts of the research methodology. Discussions about framing, editing, as well as negotiating between the women's intentions and the researcher/

filmmaker's ideas, are all part of the critical work. These choices need to be reflexively scrutinized since they constitute a particular kind of voice, and consequently impart a specific kind of knowledge. Finally, the fluid nature of the research design – the need to make spontaneous changes to filming and editing decisions which interact with the occupants but which challenge a priori assumptions about how the film should be structured – is consistent with the ethnomethodological trajectory of this project.

Remaking Public Housing Through Film

The use of film in researching Singaporean public housing domesticity is twofold. First, the majority of extant research on public housing remains invested largely on policy, statistics, typologies or urban planning (Yeh 1975; Goh 2001; Ooi and Tan 1992; Hee and Ooi 2003). Such iterations further homogenized the architecturally undifferentiated housing designs for which more than 82 per cent of the nation state's population are currently subscribers (Housing and Development Board 2015c). There is scarcely any architectural research looking at the gaps between the planned and the lived in this housing context.

In comparison to architecture's apathetic response, HDB flats have long since featured as critical *mise-en-scène* in Singapore cinema's recent resurgence of feature films. Notable Singapore auteurs, including Eric Khoo (*12 Storeys* 1997), Jasmine Ng and Kelvin Tong (*Eating Air* 1999), Royston Tan (*15* 2003), Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen (*Singapore Dreaming* 2006), Lei Yuan Bin (*03-FLATS* 2014; *White Days* 2009) and most recently Anthony Chen who won the Cannes *Camera d'Or* award in 2013 for his feature film *Ilo Ilo*, see these bittersweet domestic sites as inherently charged with narratives, emotions, experiences and practices that simultaneously adhered to, and challenged, statist prerogatives of family life and ideations of home and rootedness. *03-FLATS* takes its cue from this cinematographic lineage. It focuses on how agency might be produced within domestic space. In doing so, the essay film argues for a reformulation of a normative architectural convention that regards public housing as a top-down architectural entity.

Second, given the limited interpretations and restrictive textual discourse available to its architectural study, the move to visualize public housing in ways that highlight rather than normalize specificities of the shoot locations was necessary. The film enables seeing and thinking beyond the limited categories, methods and representations that have obscured a potentially more layered understanding. In other words, beyond being a passive recording instrument, the feminist architectural essay film is a forensic and imaginative research tool for recasting a subject often exclusively encoded in a nationalistic rhetoric.

Yet the shift towards privileging film and the moving image as critical to architectural research is new. The relationship between architecture and film has existed predominantly on an aesthetic plane with publications primarily commenting on the uncanny coincidences between filmic and architectural manipulations of space and experience (Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001, 2003; Lamster 2000; Toy 1994). Filmic space is seen in these instances as illustrative of experiences and emotions in architectural projects. It does not aim to produce new subjects and new readings. Conversely, the use of film for architectural research is driven by very different motivations. My own project questions if film could change the

entrenched representations of public housing, affect how we look at these, and encourage critical conversations to emerge. Here, the appeal of film as a research tool, medium and mode of dissemination is derived from its ability to evoke an affective atmosphere that may be understood, felt and visually read by its audience.

An example of film's critical potential is glimpsed in *12 Storeys*, a feature film made in 1997 by Eric Khoo (Tan 2008; Marchetti 2006; Tan et al. 2003). The film follows the overlapping everyday narratives played out in the spaces and lives of four families living in a 12-storey flat. The film was a critical frontrunner because it initiated (still ongoing) conversations about what it means to live the 'Singapore dream', exemplified in the ownership of a public housing flat. *12 Storeys* reimagined public housing dwelling as a perilous existence locked within the mundane and the private. Hence, the socio-spatial politics of *12 Storeys* demonstrated an entangled configuration of personal aspirations, familial pressures and statist prerogatives played out within identical housing units. It was the first time that public housing was seen as a psychologically charged space. The film traced the flat dwellers' hopes for a 'good life' despite their struggle against normativity and the status quo:

Why is it that, when precariousness is spread throughout the world, people fear giving up on the institutions that have worn out their confidence in living? [...] In all of these scenes of 'the good life', the object that you thought would bring happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for happiness. But its presence represents *the possibility of happiness as such*. And so losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it. That's a relation of cruel optimism.

(Berlant 2012)

In these features, Singaporean state-driven housing policies intrude into the space of home that holds individual dreams and ambitions. The outcome may be nonchalant, disjunctive, tense or catastrophic. Yet current research on public housing has not been able to reimagine a critical mode to discuss this dilemma without polarizing one side or the other. Often research is undertaken to improve policy, to develop new hybrid typologies or to reinforce the 'underbelly' situation where HDB occupants are habitually regarded as lacking agency. These outcomes are perhaps a result of constantly regarding 'housing' as a rarefied object without needing to acknowledge or complicate it with the slippery notion of 'home'. At the same time, however, there is a risk of approaching the idea of 'home' within the remit of a nationalized architectural project where the term has been uncritically conflated with patriotism and national ideology. As others and I have argued elsewhere (Chee 2013a; George 1998), 'home' is a spatial concept that must always be inflected against a more complex collective space including those of family, community and society.

Hence, *O3-FLATS* intervenes to consider both 'housing' and 'home'. Its engagement happens at the level of the domestic, a category that marks the 'inner life' of each housing unit. 'The domestic', Rosemary Marangoly George (1998: 3) tells us:

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 organization of kinship into a spatially manifest entity.

George's definition of domesticity changes the common understanding of the term from one insulated within the individual household to a constituent context entangled with biological, cultural, social, societal or even national imperatives. Domesticity is bound up with the maintenance of 'regulative norms' shaped by habit, tradition and ideology. Far from being innocuous, domestic routines, practices, spaces, objects, outputs and relationships may be co-opted as part of a larger societal structure. Yet, the domestic also resides in the realm of the individual, and so, remains 'corruptible' in the sense that the individual may assert control:

Domesticity draws upon the performative aspects of bodies in space – occupants, tenants, parents, grandparents, children, single men and women, maids, architects, designers and 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)

O3-FLATS adopts domesticity as a politicized and performative concept. It shows how domesticity operates on both collective and individual levels. In the film, domesticity provides a critical opening into the space between 'housing' and 'home'. Following this, the film's focus is on the interiorized dimensions of public housing, a space habitually experienced but conversely rarely depicted in architectural discourse. More than an aesthetic preference, the film's interiorized representation of public housing is a politicized position.

Within the inhabited interior spaces of a heavily regulated nationalist architectural project, glimpses of individual autonomy and the possibilities of hope, independence, defiance, resource and spontaneity may be detected. In *O3-FLATS*, the spatial politics of public housing – ideological and architectural – are visualized from the *inside* out. The film lingers intentionally from within the frequently unseen and unremarked interiors of the housing unit to create an open-ended visual essay, encouraging the viewer to negotiate the confluences, contradictions and nuances between the individual private interior and the architectural behemoth. The use of film for research is markedly different from a written text of the same research. While both textual and filmic material may be controlled and curated to convey specific arguments, film is also immediately visceral and affective in a way that text is not. As such, film can provoke an engagement with the audience that may not be entirely predictable. Film is also able to record time, and this is especially significant for a project like *O3-FLATS* that tracks a space premised on cyclical and repetitive domestic practices. Apart from its visual character, these two other aspects of film – affect and temporality – are particularly advantageous to architectural research.

Imagining Domesticity: Politics and Poetics of Filmic Representation

The essay film makes a thought process visible (Corrigan n.d.). The structure of *03-FLATS* layers or interrupts shared domestic experiences and spaces – doing laundry, sweeping and vacuuming, preparing to receive friends for a meal, watching television, fussing over a cat – with public policy and statements. And the domestic sphere is a possible framework – familiar and unknown at the same time – for thinking about the relationships between home, identity, citizenship, marriage, family and the self. This juxtaposition opens up different and often ambiguous readings of such policies, ranging between benevolence and control. One's eligibility to buy a new flat, for instance, is predicated on a series of finely calibrated conditions:

Singapore Citizens/Permanent Residents over the age of 21 may apply to purchase a HDB flat:

- only if you are part of a family nucleus;
- or are about to start a family, legally recognized by the act of marriage;
- otherwise, you may not apply until the age of 35;
- and even then you may only buy a 2-room flat in non-mature estates;
- ethnic quotas are also applied to each individual HDB block to achieve a racial balance.

(Housing and Development Board 2015b)

Nevertheless, this contract is a two-way agreement. While it is important to reiterate the family-centred priorities of the state housing campaign, it is also key to demonstrate the complexities of this context. The film traces – without the use of narrative – why these women might be simultaneously defiant and complicit with state constructs, how individual resistance can be manifested in the most mundane domestic patterns of maintenance, and how domesticity provides an active means by which each space is individually reclaimed as 'home' (Figure 5).

Although the subject matter privileged individual positions, the film breached age differences, ethnic, gender and marital categories. From post-screening feedback, many audiences in the Singapore screenings strongly related with the three women's experiences and spaces. The most significant outcome was that these viewers started to think critically about their own lives in similar housing provisions, or those of their grandparents, parents or friends. In this way, *03-FLATS* provides an alternative, albeit an unfolding and necessarily unfinished critical scaffold, for a public mired in public housing ideology to reimagine the potentials and limitations of their lives lived between these walls.

Being forced to think these things [...] as part of an unfolding historic moment exemplifies the affective experience not of a break or a traumatic present, but of crisis lived within ordinariness. Amidst the rise and fall of quotidian intensities a situation arises that provokes the need to think and adjust, to slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. What's going on?

(Berlant 2008: 5)



Figure 5: The domestic realm is recorded as a creative space where the three women create their own spaces of agency and reverie. Stills from *03-FLATS*, directed by Lei Yuan Bin, concept and research by Lilian Chee, 2014.

Partly because of its subject matter, *O3-FLATS* appears like a cross between a documentary and a home movie, or the ‘film-souvenir’ (Sobchack 1999). The film provokes reactions and reflections that go beyond the lives of the women since ‘the images of the “film-souvenir” are not apprehended *for* themselves but rather *as* the catalyst to a primary constitutive and generalizing activity that transcends their specificity’ (Sobchack 1999: 247, original emphasis). According to Vivian Sobchack (1999: 246) when existential knowledge (in this case, what the audience already know about Singaporean public housing) is merged with a particular cinematic structure (here, the embedding of public policy within routinized domestic structure and the micro-acts of resistance implied in *O3-FLATS*), a kind of ‘documentary consciousness’ emerges, and the audience begin to discern things that lie beyond the frame of the image. In *O3-FLATS* the mode of spectatorship becomes what Sobchack (1999: 250) calls ‘constitutive’ viewing where the subject matter gains an ‘evocative’ or ‘incantory’ significance because the audience bring something of their past, their prior knowledge and prior experience to bear upon the filmic experience. Sobchack’s refutation of the documentary as something finite resonates with *O3-FLATS*’ intended performative and embodied character. It was made with the idea that the audience would co-determine the film’s meaning(s), and the individual viewer would hold ‘a subjective relationship with the cinematic object. It is the viewer’s consciousness that finally determines what kind of cinematic object it is’ (Sobchack 1999: 251) – whether it is closer to a nostalgic home movie, a policy document, an archival script or a social-architectural critique.

This relationship between audience and the cinematic object is intensified by restructuring the space of home, a space that has multiple definitions and, as such, remains elusive. The film follows more routinized yet also highly particularized domestic acts that start to differentiate how individuals may negotiate and claim for themselves in what is essentially a common housing provision. At the same time, this kind of embodied spectatorship (Ravetz 2005: 73) opens up a space of empathy or recognition for a group of people – single women living in HDB flats – whose agency ‘is no longer transparent or easily accessible’ (Corrigan 2011: 155) in the current state of affairs.

The Architectural Essay Film as Critical Text

By contemplating what kind of contemporary epistemology is generated between two areas of practice defined by architectural discourse and filmmaking, several points may be made in conclusion.

The architectural essay film, which is structured around space, may choose to represent space as already determined by policy, urban planning, design and/or technological innovation, or it may choose to see these modes of design, policy and innovation as entangled with the unpredictability of individual occupancy. In other words, the architectural essay film may desire to enter the irresolvable gap between these two distinct phases of architecture’s lifespan. In *O3-FLATS*, this gap exists between the modalities of ‘housing’ and ‘home’, and the domestic structure of the film allows for a sensing and thinking about these two entangled but too often conflated categories.

The critical import of film is that it offers a site for embodied and affective projection. For Gilles Deleuze (2013: 287), the power of cinema is not in its techniques or specific content but in 'the concepts that cinema gives rise to'. In the case of *O3-FLATS*, not only is domestic space visualized but its competing temporalities – including those of the individual, the family, the neighbourhood, the citizen and the nation – are made visceral in each flat. The film attempts to manifest the social, emotional, political and ideological nuances that are inflected in public housing living. It brings attention to an unremarked category of occupants and at the same time, turns their specific experiences as being relevant to a larger collective, whether social, national or cultural. Hence, although the focus on the three women is specific, its effects are enlarging in their influences.

The prompt that provoked the making of *O3-FLATS* was how one could represent domesticity as a complex category, situating it as an embodied and gendered interstice between 'housing' and 'home'. The intention of the film was to broaden the conception of Singaporean public housing beyond the physical geometry and form of its buildings to include public policy, national aspiration, personal desire, institutional and personal memory and collective will, and also to suggest tensions ensuing from national, gendered, racial, familial and class prerogatives. More importantly, in the tradition of the essayistic, the film projects a particular personal experience of public housing – the researcher's, the filmmaker's and the women's – in the audiovisual public realm, using the cinematic medium as a scaffold for thinking about what it means to reclaim a nationalistic space as one's own. Moving beyond the written research document, the ability of this essay film to evoke the viewer's complex identification with the gendered domestic spaces of the three women will determine its relevance for current and future research on Singaporean public housing specifically, and for architectural theories of domesticity generally. In the end, what matters for *O3-FLATS*, as Deleuze (2013: 179) says, is 'the interstice between (two) images'.

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