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Unhousing sexuality: Sexuality and singlehood in Singapore's public housing

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Introduction

Looking at Singapore's ubiquitous and successful public housing, this essay will examine the perceptions and appropriations that subtly demarcate sexualized territories within these spaces. It is significant that state-sponsored architecture is outwardly concomitant with the needs and aspirations of the heteronormative nuclear family. Adding to human geography's critique of heteronormativity's limitations (Oswin 2010; Pilkey, Scicluna and Gorman-Murray 2015; Ramdas 2012; Wilkinson 2014), I will extend the discussions of 'alternate sexualities and subjectivities' through an architectural lens. I focus on 'other' spatial performances of such public housing architecture (administered by the Housing Development Board, or HDB) through the embodied perspectives of three single women who live alone in these flats.

The essay develops in two parts. The first highlights the problematics of considering sexuality as a critical category in Singaporean public housing. Here, I draw out the precariousness and absolute necessity of a feminist critique within the larger contours of a nationalistic programme, of which Singapore's public housing is exemplary. The second reprises insights gained from an architectural essay film *03-FLATS*¹, which I conceptualized in collaboration with Singaporean director Lei Yuan Bin. I discuss specific moments and spaces in

the film and reflect on the alternative embodied narratives discerned from these filmic performances of public housing. The film hints at how the single women's use of their domestic spaces challenges the atomistic existence perpetuated by nuclear families. Ultimately, I ask how the frame of 'sexuality at home' might help to understand and intervene in this hegemonic housing environment.

'Shall we get married?': Housing the nation, unhousing sexuality

The family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by 'family' in Singapore, we mean one man one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit. (Lee 2007)

Public housing in Singapore is a peculiar architectural and sociopolitical phenomenon in its unprecedented success, not just in efficiently providing mass housing but in also continuing, from the 1960s on, to house over 82 per cent of the island state's resident population (HDB 2015: 6). As such, every housing block may be said to contain a microcosm of the nation (Goh 2003).

Installed as a state-controlled housing authority in 1960 to replace the colonial government's housing body, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), the HDB's first task was to solve the housing shortage and modernize the public housing provision. This endeavour required not just an architectural investment in the most advanced building technologies, which included the use of prefabricated and modular building components, new sanitation services, passenger lifts systems and theories about environmental hygiene, it also involved a large-scale Haussmanian-like clearing of existing settlements that the state defined as urban 'slums' (Manderson 1996; Yeoh 2003). Here, communicable diseases like tuberculosis (Yeoh 2003: 93–101) had spread unchecked between densely packed dwellings holding multifamily households, single families with temporary lodgers, and groups of migrant bachelors who had travelled to Singapore for work from southern China. Characteristic of such household compositions was a loose interpretation of 'family', and social or economic alliances founded on kinship and pragmatic circumstance rather than through a marital contract.

By 1965, the fundamental problem of housing – in terms of sheltering the population – had been more than adequately addressed, and public housing continued to evolve from an architectural provision into a more sophisticated

ideological instrument of the state (Chua 1997; Clancey 2003; Goh 2003; Kong and Yeoh 2003; Tremewan 1994). The act of modernization did not just involve the most up-to-date building technologies but essentially encompassed the development of a complex and fine-tuned state-sponsored apparatus – the public housing flat as a technology of governance – that enmeshed architecture and urban planning with public policy, finance, legalities and the reinforcement of societal norms around marriage and procreation.

To this day, legal ownership and tenancy rules of a new HDB flat, which are both state controlled, are structured around categories wherein ‘eligibility’ to purchase must satisfy specific requirements. For the purchase of new three-room or larger-sized flats, the main applicant, who must be a Singaporean citizen of at least twenty-one years of age, must first form a ‘proper family nucleus’. This ‘nucleus’ may be achieved through several means: with a spouse, with one’s fiancé or fiancée, between parents and children, between siblings (orphaned/single), or between a widowed or divorced applicant and children under his/her legal or custodial care (HDB 2015). It is also implicit that the engagements must be undertaken by heterosexual couplings.

Despite the multiple combinations, the geographer Natalie Oswin points out that the HDB’s pro-family arrangements are ultimately restricted to heteronormative familial configurations – as this section’s opening quote clearly articulates – that leave out many other possible groups such as ‘unmarried persons, widowed/divorced persons without children, and single parents who have never been married’ (Oswin 2010: 257). Oswin also argues for a link between Singaporean public housing’s heteronormativity with a postcolonial ‘desire for progress, modernization and development’ (Oswin 2010). However, although SIT sought to regulate the composition of households, it did not strictly enforce these recommendations in the same way as the HDB (Oswin 2010: 262–3), whose policies made manifest the nation state’s pre-independence modernizing efforts to place the ‘married, monogamous, heterosexual, procreative couple’ (2010: 263) at the heart of the public housing project: ‘We believe that the state of our families, the building blocks of any society, determine not only the moral tone of the society but its economic health as well. As our families prosper, so does the nation’ (Tarmugi 1995).

Without fulfilling the national responsibility of procreative coupling, the stakes for single women living in public housing, an institution undergirded by familial and nationalist proclivities, is precarious if also often unimaginable. Yet as the architectural historian Beatriz Colomina reminds us, ‘The politics of space are always sexual, even if space is centred around mechanisms of the erasure of sexuality’ (Colomina 1996: first page of intro). Indeed, Singaporean public housing has successfully naturalized heteronormative sexuality so as to make it already completely unremarkable. Moreover, with almost its entire population living in public housing, an alternate view of domesticity in the Singaporean context is

problematic given that one's understanding is configured and determined by the politics of location, 'our mode of partisanship is an expression or function of our location: what that location includes or excludes' (Radhakrishnan 1992: 83). If public housing has housed a nation, it has succeeded by aggressively linking productive heterosexual coupling with rights to housing. The conservative view – that biological reproduction is only acceptable within a heterosexual relationship – is widespread and entrenched: 'The idealization of motherhood by the virile fraternity would seem to entail the exclusion of all nonreproducing-oriented sexualities from the discourse of the nation' (Parker et al. 1991: 6). As such, although the question of public housing has been broached through gendered terms, particularly in the discipline of human geography (Phua and Yeoh 1998; Yeoh and Huang 2010), the existing discourse has primarily focused on family-related entities such as married women, mothers and maids. The subject of single women in public housing has fallen by the wayside.

Bodies at home: Three single women in Singapore's public housing

Neither gender performances nor spatial typologies are fixed. As gender performances may be overdetermined by spatial contexts, spatial typologies can be subverted by those who fall outside heteronormative social matrices. (Baydar 2012: 702)

Recognizing this heteronormative stronghold, my architectural essay film *03-FLATS* (03-FLATS 2014) reacts against and attempts to critique the over-exhausted hegemonic representation of public housing as one catering exclusively to a 'family-centred heterosexism' (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 114), on the one hand, and as an architectural entity that is primarily examined from an urban or macro perspective, on the other. Filming was completed over ten months by Lei, who acted as the lone camera person. More than two hundred hours of footage was jointly edited by both Lei and myself over the course of one year.² The architectural theorist Gülsüm Baydar argues that 'heteropatriarchal understandings of space based on masculinist premises have largely ignored women ... who may subvert or alter normative spatial practices' (Baydar 2012: 699). Given this, the film addresses the under-sexualized or asexualized representations of Singaporean public housing through its three subjects by asking these questions: What if the HDB is imagined from the interior of the flat? What if the HDB is seen from the perspective of a single woman? What if the HDB's architectural space is reimagined from her body?³ These questions revolve around issues of architectural representation, and more

specifically, the consequences of architectural discourse and representation when architecture intersects with sexuality. How would sexuality play out in the representation of public housing? How does the sexuality of three single women affect how the architecture of public housing is discussed and visually portrayed?

The three flats featured in the essay film belong to, and are occupied by, three single Singaporean women whose ages ranged between early forties to mid-seventies at the time the film was made. Ling Nah and Amy purchased their flats from the open market after they were eligible (once they turned thirty-five years old), while Madam Sim inherited her property after her mother passed on. The decision to focus on three single women turned what was initially an aesthetic exercise in alternative visual representation into a politicized inquiry about the distinctly unremarked gender and sexual politics in architectural representation (Chee 2017). If the 'body' is evoked in architectural representation, it is the white male body which is implied (Bloomer 1995; Burns 1996; Wigley 1992). At the same time, this bodily reference is increasingly rendered discursive or metaphorical. It lacks materiality, or what Robyn Longhurst describes as the messiness of corporeal flesh and fluid (Longhurst 2004). And because 'bodies cannot be understood outside of place' (Longhurst 2004: 23), a reinscription of the single woman's body within the politicized space of public housing simultaneously counterposes a different value system to familial ownership and occupation of this architecture, while also pressing us to re-evaluate our understanding of such spaces through these 'new' bodies.

If public housing has been frequently portrayed as monumental and heroic in scale with a focus on its new, shiny outer forms and building technologies, *03-FLATS* produces a counternarrative by looking at the same architecture through the biographical, the mundane and the sexually differentiated life rhythms of these single women as they are positioned within the architectural interiors of the housing project. An attention to 'corporeal feminism' (Johnson 1990: 18) in public housing was never an explicit aim when I conceptualized the essay film. In fact, it was only through watching the footage many times over that I came to note the particularly nuanced ways in which these single women occupy and perceive public housing architecture. The women's appropriation of normative spatial typologies within the flat – and here I will focus on the common corridor, the bedroom and the living room – arguably disarm public housing's alienating culture of atomistic existence wherein nuclear families retreat into the security of their individual interiors, while domestic life becomes bound to, or limited by, these relatively static and homogeneous spaces.

So, as I rework the relationship between sexuality and public housing through this filmic material, it is not with the aim of using the film to explicate conclusively or propose that it represents generalized findings which may apply

to all singles living in Singaporean public housing. Instead, what becomes clear is that through the body, 'the limits of experience and subjectivity' (Grosz 1992: 244) of each architectural space is fluid, with the flats being defined and redefined by the women as they move through different life stages and encounter the pleasures, and perils, of living alone.

... Emerging through the corridor

In the short story 'Corridor' by Singaporean writer and poet Alfian Sa'at (Sa'at 2015), a body with seven stab wounds is found at dawn, lying on the common corridor connected to a row of flats. The short story negotiates this corridor through a series of acrimonious encounters between neighbours and between these neighbours and strangers to the block, like the murdered man whom no one knew, 'no relatives found, dying words unrecorded, nothing to answer to but a ledge that blocked his view of dawn, and the fast-fading stars' (Sa'at 2015: 63). Conceptualized originally as a communal 'street' in the sky, the HDB's common corridor was designed for convivial gathering, for promoting chance encounters between residents, and in the ideal situation, for adoption by each household as an extended space of their individual flats. In some cases, corridors flourish as evidenced by the carefully tended gardens, children playing along its length, and neighbours checking up on each other on their way out or coming home. In other cases, such as Sa'at's 'Corridor', the corridor becomes an estranged space where the unknown lurks. The corridor becomes a fearful zone where the hazards of the outside threaten to spill inwards, disrupting the sanctuary of home.

In *03-FLATS*, however, Amy, who is a transgendered woman in her late 40s, spends as much time on her corridor as she does inside her flat. Amy

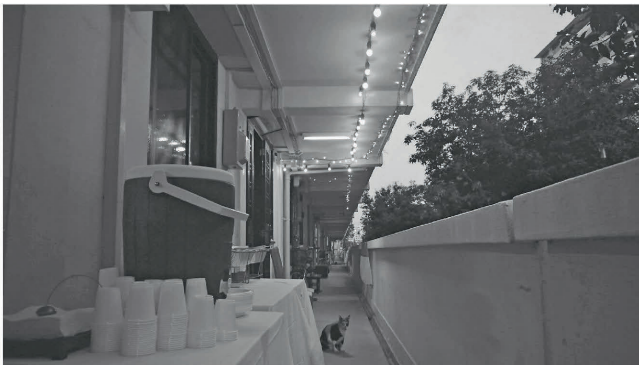


FIGURE 2.1 *The common corridor obstructed by a long table for Hari Raya. Courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin.*

openly acknowledges her alternate sexuality. She strongly self-identifies with the term 'transgender', perhaps as a way of making visible another community who have rights to public housing and are living in similar flats but remain unrecognized. This desire to become visible is translated to how she occupies such an open but deserted space like the corridor. Here is where she takes phone calls, plays with her cat, Dizzy, and pops out for a smoke. In the film, we see her watching television with Dizzy on their couch. The front door is left open, and at intermittent moments, this television scene is punctuated by her raucous laughter and gregarious greeting of neighbours walking in front of her flat. Instead of being placed in a private corner, the couch is situated immediately adjacent to the open door. The placement of the couch suggests that Amy does not perceive the space as an entrance hallway or a transition between the exterior and the interior of her flat. It is as if she has already entered the flat even before she opens the metal gate (a second layer of security installed by every resident, in addition to the wooden front door). While others keep their doors open for ventilation but the metal gate locked for security, Amy's gate and door are kept open whenever she is at home.

In another extended scene, Amy gets a council worker to clear large pieces of unwanted rubbish that others on the estate have dumped in the lift lobby connected to her corridor. She then begins to wash the floor herself with soap and water. This clearing and washing lead up to her appropriating the corridor and the lift lobby for the Muslim Hari Raya festival, a celebration held after the fasting month of Ramadhan (Fig. 2.1). She decorates the lift lobby as one would a room, putting up red streamers on the ceiling and setting up tables covered with starched linen cloths. Against the outside wall of her flat, along the narrow corridor, she places a long table laden with traditional Malay dishes for her guests, who number over eighty persons and are barely contained by her modest sixty-square-metre flat.



FIGURE 2.2 *Dizzy the cat waiting at the threshold of the flat and the corridor. Courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin.*

In both these instances (on her couch and at her Hari Raya party), Amy distinguishes herself from the heteronormative family norms of what to do and where to be. She emerges as the fun-loving, loud, cheerful, cat-loving, middle-aged, transgendered single woman – a complex ‘Other’ persona in this cautiously regarded context of the shared corridor space. Her unguarded behaviour here correlates with the notion that the overscripted communitarian roles and ideologies of ‘family’ have failed to resonate in such in-between zones. The ‘open spaces’ of the HDB block, made exemplary by the ground-level ‘void deck’ and the common corridors on each floor, were indeed meant to have the kind of liveliness and spontaneity that made the slums and play-areas of their back lanes so attractive to the early HDB settlers (Seng 2012: 153). Through her generous, excessive and ‘spectacular’ acts of friendship,⁴ Amy converts the fringe site of the corridor into a carnivalesque space in which the rules of use and conduct are made ambiguous and porous (Stallybrass and White: 1986), overturning the ‘aesthetic of containment’ (Seng 2012: 152) that the public housing block has so successfully deployed.

In her exacting occupation of that potentially alienating space, Amy has domesticated the corridor and made it contingently social in purpose. She has reactivated the corridor’s self-surveillance capacity, that of opening every flat on it to public scrutiny, for a more benign function. Turning the visibility of her premises to her advantage, she uses this modern Panopticon to safeguard her own vulnerability. As the sexuality of her transgendered body renders Amy’s position in the family-centric space fluid and uncertain, how her body destabilizes some of the spatial and architectural norms attached to the corridor and her flat within the institution of public housing are also made more complex by her relationship to her cat Dizzy. Through the film, we also view the spaces of the block through Dizzy as she goes in and out of the flat (Fig. 2.2). Or more accurately, we are left to imagine where Dizzy might go, how this cat might roam the corridors, staircases, lift lobbies and void decks as she slips in and out of the camera’s frame at her own will. Significantly, while dogs are allowed as pets in HDB households, cats are prohibited. This is probably because it is hard to restrain them indoors, and also because they tend to multiply quickly and prolifically. The sexed body of the cat must be controlled. Yet, like Dizzy, many cats continue to freely roam public housing estates. Their domestic geographies overlap with the hostile, interstitial and disregarded corners of these estates.

... From the sewing machine

The oldest flat is owned by Madam Sim, who is in her late 70s. She has lived in the same apartment since 1974, when she jointly purchased the



FIGURE 2.3 *From the vantage point of the sewing machine. Courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin.*



FIGURE 2.4 *Creative activity in the bedroom. Courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin.*

newly built two-bedroom flat with her mother. Growing up at a time when women's education was not prioritized, much of her young adult life was spent babysitting her infant nephews and nieces who were left in her care at their Holland Close flat. She cooked and cared for her mother, whom she resided with, and worked as part-time domestic help at several households. In recent years, she was the sole carer for her ageing mother who passed on in 2011.

In *03-FLATS*, there is an extended scene of Madam Sim cutting and stitching a child's garment before finally presenting this garment to a toddler, who is her grandniece (Fig. 2.3). The child is seen trying on the garment in the living room. The scenes were shot from the doorway of Madam Sim's bedroom, where the sewing machine is placed. This is Madam Sim's vantage point. Her frail and severely arthritic seventy-year-old body is positioned at the fringe between bedroom and living room. Here, she hones a craft she loves, one which also maintains a family tradition that this older woman has established through the years she has lived in this flat.⁵

In Daniel Miller's study of retrofitted kitchens in London council flats, he noted that the householders needed to 'enter into creative strategies of consumption to appropriate that which they have not themselves created' in order to achieve a sense of fulfilment (Miller 1988: 370). In Madam Sim's case, her most prized possession is a heavy, old-fashioned Singer sewing machine. It was purchased in 1970 and was carried over from her rental flat in Tanglin Halt to the new property at Holland Close when she and her mother first moved here. The sewing machine is extremely heavy, weighing at least twice the weight of its owner. A self-taught and skilled seamstress, Madam Sim still enjoys sewing. Often asked by relatives and friends to create clothes or upholstery for special occasions, sewing is an important part of her creative life. Like her cooking, Madam Sim's sewing is socially motivated. She does it for leisure rather than out of need. The sewing machine is placed in her bedroom, which is adjacent to the common corridor, or the first room flanking the living room that one encounters upon entering the flat (Fig. 2.4). It was put there so it could be worked on without disturbing her mother, who used to sleep in the other room. The sewing machine faces a blank wall that separates the bedroom from the living room, and is placed just next to the bedroom door. This door is always kept open. From her sewing machine, Madam Sim has a commanding view of the living room.

The introduction of the sewing machine at the boundary of these adjacent spaces – one private and the other one more public – suggests a revised understanding of the sexually differentiated idea that the home should be a private space for family and not a public space of labour. Recent historical research on the typology of live/work spaces by Frances Holliss suggests that the enforced separation between living and working may not have been as dominant as is assumed (Holliss 2012, 2015). Holliss's study ultimately challenges the convention of home being reserved for private familial reverie. It might also support the critique that this concept of privacy is intrinsically motivated by a conservatism that views home as the primary site of biological reproduction, and consequently that this kind of privatization is sexually rather than socially constructed. In Madam Sim's situation, such normative spatial relationships are complicated. The bedroom is private, not just for sleep, but for setting aside quiet space for Madam Sim's creative work on the sewing machine. A bedroom traditionally reserved for sex – procreative sex in the eyes of HBD – has become a bed-sewing room that maintains Madam Sim's position as the family's elected seamstress. The bedroom is still private but it is active. It is a place of production – its output materially creative rather than biologically so.

In his exposé of the bourgeois interior, Walter Benjamin espouses the importance of being a collector who has a 'connoisseur's value' on the objects of the home as opposed to one who 'tak(es) possession' of things

as mere commodities, defining these objects only through their usefulness (Benjamin 1999: 19). The old-fashioned sewing machine – simultaneously useful equipment and useless relic – at the edge of the bedroom with a perpetually open door challenges the normative boundaries and conduct assigned to this single woman's private sphere. The living room, which is traditionally the most 'active' and most public space in the flat, is here suspended between a productive kitchen and a creative sewing room, between the stove and the sewing machine; the activity and presence of the living room is here completely reliant on the flows of food and clothing produced in these two other feminized spaces.

... Drawing, dressing, dwelling

The last flat is the biggest and newest of the three featured in the film. It is owned by Ling Nah, a prominent Singaporean artist in her early forties who is known for her large-scale charcoal drawings of the city's transitory spaces.

Unlike Amy and Madam Sim, Ling Nah's domestic space is completely inseparable from her professional work as an artist. It is not unusual nowadays for someone to work from or at home. However, here, the separation between what is work and what is home is often ambiguous. It is as though by working from home, work cannot help but be inflected by the rhythms and forms of domestic life. Here, the boundaries between home and studio are constantly challenged and broken down by numerous newspaper clippings, postcards, notes, books and drawings which collide and mix with 'cute' collectable soft toys, sentimental mementoes and household paraphernalia.

The film begins by scrutinizing the view from Ling Nah's window. We see an old shipyard and a new port in the making. There are vast strips of land in the horizon, fading into the sea. The industrial landscape outside her flat is evidence of the economic foundations on which Singapore was first built and continues to prioritize. As the camera turns towards the interior, we see Ling Nah working at home, oscillating between making art and keeping house: pinning huge



FIGURE 2.5 *The studio in the living room. Courtesy of Lei Yuan Bin.*

pieces of blank canvas on the walls and collecting wastewater from the washing machine to clean the toilet; drawing and cleaning; drawing and cooking.

The living room is the epicentre of this flat. Here, faint but discernible traces of charcoal residue are visible everywhere – on the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, the curtains and, we might imagine, in the air. By normal domestic standards, this soot-stained space would fare miserably. But it is not quite a standard living room. It has an industrial, workaday air, as if summoning up the landscape glimpsed through the window. It is a restless space of production. There is nowhere to sit and relax. In the centre of the space, there is a big table with a computer and two chairs. They are chairs for working from. The living room-studio was created by gutting out two bedrooms (Fig. 2.5). By HDB standards, it is a big space. It is surrounded on one end by the last remaining bedroom and on the other end by ceiling-high shelving.

The studio is distinguished by its organized clutter. The space lacks the permanence associated with domestic architecture. It is always changing – walls are continually covered and uncovered with newspaper, newsprint, canvas, charcoal, pencil; shelves slide open to reveal a toilet, a wardrobe of clothes and another window hidden behind the wardrobe; piles of stuff migrate from one side to another to make space for work. The walls are not decorative as much as they are confused with impermanent coverings (charcoal, canvas, mementoes, clothing, souvenirs). The studio is made of walls that are constructed around or conceal what is superfluous to the wall and to the architecture. It is continually dressed and undressed. The wall is undermined and obfuscated by layer upon layer of coverings and accessories.

Significantly, the architectural theorist Mark Wigley describes modern architecture as having a 'dresslike quality' (Wigley 1995: xxv). Its 'whiteness' refers not only to the white paint that is used on the walls, but also to the denial of any kind of coating or accessory that would diminish the structural integrity of modern architecture. Whitewashing, argues Wigley, may be said to be another kind of fashionable accessory and thus comparable to the categories which modern architecture ghettoizes as 'supposedly inferior, as "feminine," domains of "ornament," "accessories," "interior decoration," "art nouveau," "architect's partner," "homosexual," "woman," and so on' (Wigley 1995: xxv).

In Ling Nah's studio, this dress-like quality is taken to another level. Not only is the whitewash contaminated by charcoal residue so that the white wall becomes increasingly obvious and must be conscientiously kept clean, the accessorized walls also clearly need to be worked on – dusted, wiped, polished, painted, arranged and rearranged – so that they do not collapse. Here, the whitewashed wall and the accessories it carries are all artifices of domestic labour. There is no 'clear and naked emergence of the Essential'

architecture, borne of an efficient, modern and functional body which Le Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture* attests can be had by 'rejection, pruning, cleansing' (Le Corbusier 1931 [1923]: 138). Here, the demand for the white, undecorated wall can only be achieved through housework, a domestic undertaking which is usually assigned to and performed by a female body. As such, the white wall becomes sexualized by the housework which enables it.

Adjacent to the studio is Ling Nah's bedroom. It is separated from the studio by a beaded curtain and its interior is visible from the studio. The feature of the bedroom is yet another wall. This is a wall of shelves holding all kinds of collectable vintage toys and trinkets that jostle for space among some books on politics and biographies. The toys are colourful, furry, cute, soft and plush. Even when lined up neatly row upon row, they are tactile, sensual. The bedroom is purposefully dressed in childlike clothes. It might be an escape for the artist whose work is frequently seen in black and white.

The studio is, in effect, very much like the bedroom. If the latter's childlike contents are disciplined by strict arrangement, the former's monochromatic contents are disrupted by an urge to endlessly collect and hoard. The consequence is that architecture disappears into and is displaced by stuff, by decoration, by ornament. The ornamental is the only architecture left. The promiscuities between architecture and ornament, art and domesticity, the artist and the homeowner are everywhere visible. They resist the whitewash.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have pressed the question of embodied sexuality into the re-evaluation of Singaporean public housing, giving first a 'big picture' of this conceptual blind spot, and then reflecting on the architectural essay film *03-FLATS* to viscerally and vicariously think through this quandary. In particular, I have examined the category of sexuality in public housing through the perspectives of three single Singaporean women. Given the cultural, familial and national pressures to marry and procreate, coupled with the public housing programme's outwardly pro-family stance, this group has unsurprisingly received little attention in terms of research. I draw on the essay film to discuss the women's embodied spatial negotiations of their flats.

The body is affective, and architecture seen through such a body is also affective. This is where the film is able to bring out the nuances of sexuality and space, showing architecture as always entangled with something else, continually suspended in 'the midst of' time, rhythms, rituals, routines, atmospheres, textures brought about by ageing, weathering and use. Here, the sexualized bodies are marked by physical frailties, gendered proclivities,

emotional attachments and social relationships. These bodies are eccentric, fleshy, storied, historicized, politicized and socialized. The reading of the spaces in *03-FLATS* is both complicated by and enmeshed with the physical, social, psychological and emotional dimensions that surround the three single women who have also chosen to live alone.

The film's effects cannot be duplicated by textual discourse. But as the theorist, artist and filmmaker Trinh T Minh-Ha argues, 'It is important not to confuse the film with the discussion around it or with the theoretical work that comes out of it' (Minh-Ha 2013: 143). Because it is never 'the truth' or objective fact, the film should not be seen as unquestionable evidence. Rather, this essay has done what Minh-ha advocates, which is to 'not speak about' but only to discuss what the film impresses upon me, what is 'nearby' and to use it to 'theorize with' (Minh-Ha 2013).

I began by asking if sexuality could matter as a critical category within a hegemonic housing environment. The visual narratives woven by the three single women in the architectural essay film *03-FLATS* suggest that the recognition of sexual difference opens up new ways of understanding the degree by which public housing – an entity shaped through policy, design and habit, as suited to heterosexual families – might accommodate other ways of being and living. More importantly, it also offers glimpses of how these spaces may be creatively occupied by others outside the heterosexual familial norm.

Notes

- 1 *03-FLATS* is a film conceptualized by myself (as principal investigator), directed by Lei Yuan Bin and funded by the Ministry of Education, Singapore and the National University of Singapore. For more information on the film and research project, see Chee 2014.
- 2 Filming started in September 2012 and was completed in July 2013. The editing was completed in May 2014. The film was officially released at the Busan International Film Festival in October 2014, where it was chosen to compete in the Wide Angle Documentary competition. *03-FLATS* won the Best ASEAN Documentary in the Salaya International Documentary Film Festival in February 2015.
- 3 It is of no coincidence that Lei and myself share a fascination for Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), a film whose plot is bound to the architectural confines of one flat and structured around the domestic routines taking place within this limited setting. *03-FLATS* is very much influenced by and indebted to Akerman's technique of giving value to women and housework, with the film transforming such mundane gestures into what may be described as 'hyperreal', that is, that these denigrated aspects acquire their own sociopolitical and aesthetic value in the film (see Margulies 1996).

- 4 In 2012, Amy shared her home with a family of six and their helper for nine months as the family was unable to find suitable housing.
- 5 For activist potential of domestic maintenance and preservation, see Young 2005.

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