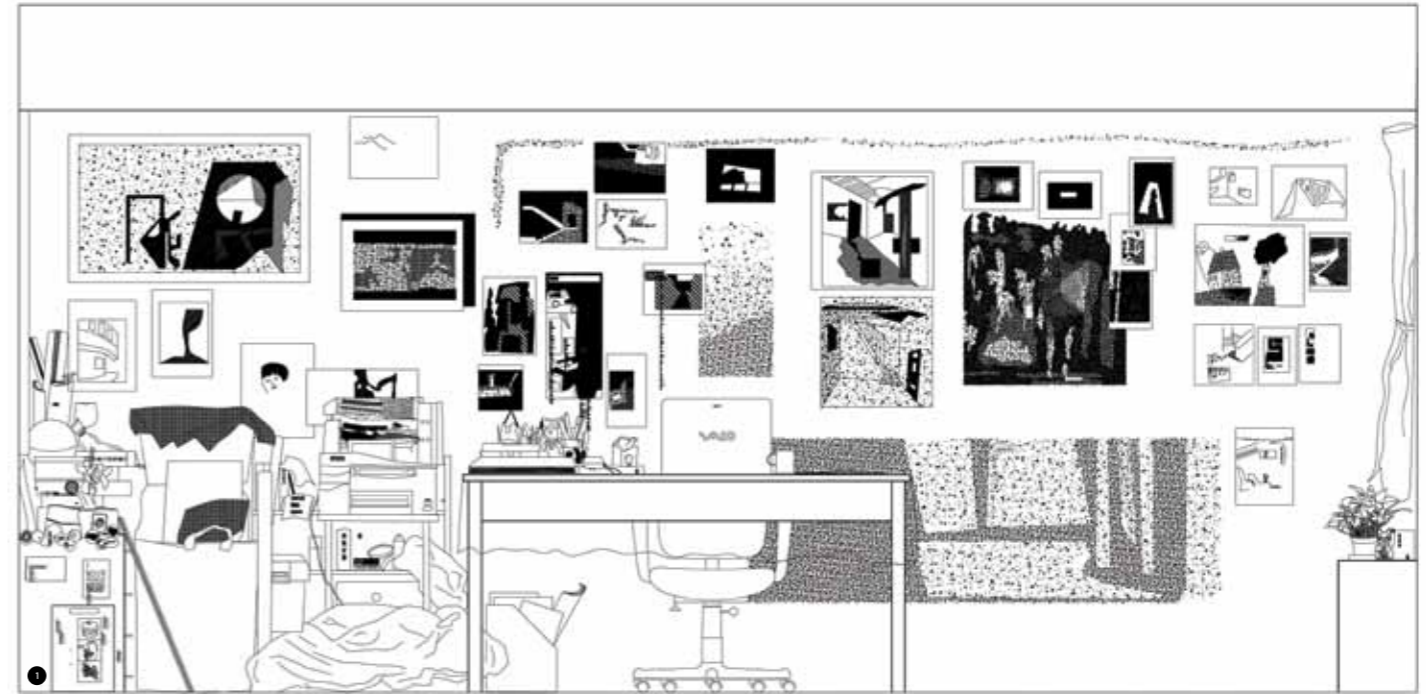


Letters from Home¹

Reconsidering Representations of Domesticity

Text by Lilian Chee
Images as credited

Presented originally at the ETH-Future Cities Lab *Spaces of Change* Lecture Series in March 2013, this essay by *Lilian Chee*, Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture in NUS ponders the meaning and perception of domesticity through her independent film *Three Flats*.



“Besides, there can be no doubt that the perception of space is a complex phenomenon: space is perceived and represented indissolubly.”

Roger Callois

Maurice Blanchot describes “the everyday” as a “banality” that is important because it “brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived... escap(ing) every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.”² This afternoon, I would like to reflect on a topic that has preoccupied me over the last few years, initially as an experiencing subject, and later on, as a purportedly “objective” researcher in the academic field.

This topic concerns the everyday matters of home, and includes domestic activities, rights, and rituals related to this very same sphere. In fact, Blanchot’s observation of “the everyday” as both banal and significant surmises the dilemma I faced when I attempted to make sense of my findings using the means available to me from my own architectural training.

Certainly the devices of architectural drawings and discourse tend to sidestep what Blanchot has named as the “banal” in the domestic realm, more focused as it were on the formation of space through geometrical projection and imagination, that is to say, an

idea is habitually emplaced in the drawing or model, which is yet unbuilt or uninhabited. The difficulty with this technique is its emphasis on architecture as produced singularly through design, specifically through the originary figure of the architect. Instead, as Jonathan Hill reminds us, architecture is equally “made by the user as much as by the architect. Neither are the two terms mutually exclusive. They exist within each other.”³ This situation rings particularly true in domestic spaces, which are constantly adjusted, appropriated, and often completely altered through everyday use and occupation.

Here, I wish to outline a set of categories, which however provisional, overlapping, and contingent, may offer some parameters for rethinking the barbs one encounters when trying to interpret and convey this subject matter. These categories include firstly, the production of architecture through occupation, secondly, the need to critically include and historicise the experiences of the researcher in the field, and finally, to discuss the role of alternate media in attempts to represent domesticity. In this respect, I will take the filmic essay made as part of my research in collaboration with Singaporean independent film collective 13 Little Pictures, as a point of departure.

¹ Elevation of an occupied living room. (Image: Lilian Chee and NUS)

²⁻⁴ Film stills from *Three Flats*. (Image: 13 Little Pictures and NUS)

Bearings: Conceptual and Cultural

My interest is in architecture's ability to account for the afterlife of a design, when that design has been lived. Indeed, does architecture discount the tools for interpreting alternate modes of production, in this case, through usage and occupation? Are contingent agency and experience accumulated through these alternate modes precluded? I am reminded of Michel Foucault's admonition that interpretation is not always gradual and derivative, and as such, the interpretative task revolving around something escaping conventional architectural representation may need to be more radical in its approach:

*If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent of surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.*⁴

Beatriz Colomina offers a compelling figure that correlates with Foucault's interpretive "violence." She advocates that "architecture" being distinct from "building," is already an "interpretive, critical act."⁵ Colomina argues that it is Ariadne rather than Daedalus (the latter conventionally perceived in Greek legend as the first architect of the labyrinth) who

... achieved the first work of architecture, since it was she who gave Theseus the ball of thread by means of which he found his way out of the labyrinth having killed the Minotaur. [T]hus while Ariadne did not build the labyrinth, she was the one who interpreted it; and this is architecture in the modern sense of the term. ... The thread of Ariadne is not merely a representation of the labyrinth. It is a project, a veritable production...

In Colomina and Foucault's terms, representation is not a mere copy of the original, such that it only reflects the geometrical image of a labyrinth, but instead a radical system of thought, capable of deconstructing the structural potentialities of this new and complex space. And in that sense, Ariadne's thread provides the conceptual turn or a "device that has the result of throwing reality into crisis."⁶

So what makes domestic space, or home, so distinctive a field for reconsidering architectural representation? In his now

famous description of the domestic interior, Walter Benjamin speaks of the traces inevitably left behind by everyday living:

*To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverings and antimacassars, boxes and casings, are devised in abundance; in these, the traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior.*⁷

And while the modernist project, already present in Benjamin's time as he surveyed the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, increasingly sought to efface these traces through the intractable surfaces of steel and plate glass, the messy circumstances of everyday domestic living with its constant accumulation of household necessities, material possessions, detritus, knick knacks, and souvenirs, continues to go against the grain of architecture's erasure. Apart from this materialist perspective, domestic space is also a site where two or more cultural systems, and two or more modes of social discourse collide—what Diana Agrest calls the meeting point between "design" and "non-design."⁸

For Agrest, "design" is "in effect a closed system" in relation to other cultural systems because it is "reductive" by collapsing "general cultural notions within its own distinct parameters."⁹ The problematics of such a closed system become apparent when design is made to articulate particular relationships between itself and other cultural systems, in this case, the domestic everyday. It is here where sea changes surface in terms of the production of meaning, and how new structures of meaning may be teased out and conveyed.

Contexts: Domestic Matters

*That sentiment accompanying the absence of home—homesickness—can cut two ways: it can be a yearning for the authentic home (situated in the past or in the future) or it can be the recognition of the inauthenticity of all homes.*¹⁰

Rosemary Marangoly George

As a cultural system, the domestic site of home is a loaded entity. It is an ambivalent location, which is both private and public. It is where we construct and project various versions of our selves, and where we invest the most intimate parts of our lives. As such, home is a territory that escapes neutrality. It is inevitably self-invested. 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."¹¹

"Home," feminist thinker, writer, and activist bell hooks reminds us, is a private sanctuary in which the minority—she names in her case, blacks, women and children—can find room for organising solidarity. It is a site for resistance, for doing one's own thing under one's own terms, away from would-be oppressors. bell hooks tells us that no matter how "fragile" or "tenuous" the state of one's home is, it most certainly holds a "political dimension."¹² "The appropriation and use of space are political acts."¹³

In terms of scale, 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 unhomey."¹⁴ 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 susceptible to local cultures, including ethnic beliefs, mythologies, and rituals.

Home is thus both a physical location and a set of emotions/ideologies/feelings. It is a manifestation of the *relationship* that 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 or individual, whether it is heterosexual or otherwise.

Agencies: Dwelling as Preservation

The question of spatial agency—whose right and freedom to space—is fraught with unspoken tension in domestic sites. Eugene Delacroix's infamous painting *Women of*

Algiers in Their Apartment, executed after the artist stayed only three days in Algiers, raises some fascinating questions related to this issue. The painting portrays three women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah. The third, in the foreground, leans towards us. In the background, we see a female servant who plays a minor role, pushing aside the heavy tapestry that cocoons this universe.

*The whole meaning of this painting is played out in the relationship these three women have with their bodies, as well as the place of their enclosure. Resigned prisoners in a closed place that is lit by a kind of dreamlike light coming from nowhere—a hothouse light or that of an aquarium—Delacroix's genius makes them both near and distant to us at the same time, enigmatic to the highest degree...*¹⁵

In Delacroix's rendition, the domestic sphere is not only characterised as antithetical to the more open, transparent and liberated public sphere, it is also a space with gendered connotations. Often, these allude to a sense of confinement, particularly to the female occupant who is subject to the "forbidden gaze" yet lacks agency to construct her own sets of identity. She seems powerless to claim this space as her own. In the painting, the women are integral to the setting, even blending with the iridescent light, but they are simultaneously excluded from this interior by their obvious inactivity. However, one could interpret the painting conversely, seeing the women as safeguarding the sanctity of the interior by sacrificing their selves and their bodies, in order to preserve the unseen interior's mystique, rituals and privacy.

In her essay "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a theme," feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young lays out an argument for why home can still carry liberating potentials despite feminist claims that home is deeply ambivalent, having traditionally confined women, mothers, and perhaps to extend it to the Singapore context, domestic helpers, to supportive domestic roles, which may strip them of their individual identities and agencies.¹⁶

Revisiting Martin Heidegger's seminal text on dwelling, Young emphasises that Heidegger divides the notion of "dwelling" into two moments—one of building and the other of preservation, claiming that both moments are equally important in the constitution of "dwelling." Yet, Heidegger himself prioritises the heroic act of building over preservation, the latter term subsequently left unremarked and unexplored in his writing.

Young valorises the idea of dwelling as preservation, which she describes as keeping the past alive, not in the sense of nostalgia but in the sense of enacting “a specific mode of subjectivity and historicity.” Such subjectivity and historicity are embodied in one’s changing relationship to a home filled with objects, memories, practices, and rituals that have everything to do with one’s self, habits, and history. “The home,” Young reiterates, “is not simply the things, however, but their arrangements in space in a way that supports the habits and routines of those who dwell there. ... The things and their arrangement bear witness to the sedimentation of lives lived there. The home is an extension of and mirror for the living body in its everyday activity.”¹⁷

Here, Young suggests that the idea of homemaking as preservation, a thankless, repetitive, and banal task, undertaken by countless women, men, mothers, fathers, and domestic helpers, is equally pivotal in safeguarding the notion of “home.” These possessions in space, she stresses are paradoxically “priceless; often worthless even on the yard sale market, (but) the arrangement of these things in rooms is what I would mourn with the deepest grief if they were destroyed by fire or theft.”¹⁸

“Homemaking consists in the activities of endowing things with living meaning, arranging them in space in order to facilitate the life activities of these to whom they belong, and preserving them, along with their meaning.”¹⁹ Preservation as homemaking links home with time and history. Of course, preservation is repetitive: “over and over things must be dusted and cleaned,” and maintenance is unseen, cyclical labour which is completely anathema to the “quintessential meaning and individuality” associated with moments of *founding*—such as the erecting of a house, or the establishment of a city.²⁰ However, Young sees preservation as furnishing a supporting envelope for an “ever-changing subject by knitting together today and yesterday, integrating the new events and relationships into the narrative of life, the biography of a person, a family, a people.”²¹

In this already entangled scheme of things, there is the assumption that the researcher in the field, in this case myself, remains a distant and unaffected observer. This assumption is never further from the truth. As much as home is precious to the subjects I investigate, it is also a space I am invested in. So how can my involuntary participation be critically

accounted for and represented? How can my own experience, both personal and collective to acts and sites of domesticity, also be problematicised so as to become productive?

Experience: Historicising the researcher’s position

The word “history” vacillates between two poles: the story that is recounted and what is produced. This truism still has the value of designating, between these two meanings, the area of labour and change.

Michel de Certeau

In “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott opens her essay with an autobiographical narrative of one man’s life-changing experience in a bathhouse in the 1960s.²² The author Samuel Delany, a gay black man, speaks of his first public encounter with an “undulating mass of naked male bodies” dimly lit in haunting blue light and “spread wall to wall.”²³ Scott emphasises that one possible reading of this scene is authorised by Delany’s “vision” and his firsthand “experience”:

*Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is the direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged, writing is put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.*²⁴

The point which Scott laboriously makes is that the evidence of experience is problematic in orthodox research because experience is here assumed to be “uncontestable” and “originary” while remaining safely within the limits of a method which privileges the researcher’s “vision” as a reliable source of evidence, whether this “vision” is enlarged by new direct experiences, or whether an inaccurate or incomplete vision is corrected by the researcher’s authoritative experience.²⁵ In the quoted passage, Scott raises several provocative points—the temptation of conceptualising historical knowledge (the field she is critiquing) as a discipline premised on the visible, and more crucially, that this vision is equally transparent and accessible to every person; the status of experience as a critical form of evidence, and the authority of the all-seeing researcher in this web of relations.

Nevertheless, Scott recognises that experience is too much imbricated in our everyday life and usage to be simply dismissed.²⁶ Thus, she challenges us to think about experience as “that which we want to explain” rather than



something which we ground our explanations on.²⁷ In my own reading, Scott’s quarrel is not so much with the question of experience itself as it is with the authoritative position enabled by experience posited as a kind of foundationalist discourse which she points out, “avoid(s) examining the relationships between discourse, cognition, and reality, and the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge.”²⁸

What Scott suggests, I gather, is that experience is discursive rather than originary, that is to say, experience is *produced* through “one’s relationship to dominant institutions and discourses”²⁹ and a theorisation of experience potentially exposes different modes of access and varying productions of knowledge which may affirm, contradict, or contest what we already know. Following Gayatri Spivak, Scott challenges historians to “make visible the assignment of subject-positions” not by:

*... capturing the reality of objects seen, but by trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieved their effect because they are not noticed.*³⁰

Scott re-reads the Delany’s experience as evidences of difference, that is, these experiences are not self-evident but viscerally and culturally constructed through the fact of difference mediated by a gay black man’s vision of the world and the meanings available to him. Scott’s call for “reflexivity” suggests that the researcher adopts a conscious position in relation to his/her modes of experience. This reflexive position also implies that the socially and culturally constructed identity of the researcher as an experiencing subject herself be taken into account in her labour of research and interpretation.³¹

Scott’s perspective complicates the definition and process of architectural representation even further since it binds the researcher into the active and conscious production of architectural knowledge. Extending this position, architectural historians Barbara Penner and Charles Rice call for a reconsideration of architecture’s *remits* and forms of evidence:

...it might be possible, even desirable, sometimes to have architectural history without a concern for architecture....what we propose is a kind of “secondary” consideration of architecture, one that doesn’t take its self-evidence and centrality as given.

Instead, we're proposing a method which tries to sense what we call architecture's "background effect" in order to investigate its impact on ... architectural ... (discourse), as well as its impact on the wider contexts, and the way those are studied by a variety of disciplines (such as geography, literature, cultural studies, anthropology). ... Yet this is not simply a call for interdisciplinary perspectives. ... what is proposed with this idea of "background effect" is a change in the nature of the inquiry rather than the simple displacement of the architectural object.³²

Ecstatic Architecture: Notes on a Filmic Essay

In relation to Penner and Rice's provocation for a change in the nature of inquiry, I would like to close this discussion by sharing an observational research film made as part of my own research into domesticity. I am fascinated with the other side of Heidegger's "dwelling"—how preservation through occupation, maintenance and care, are also instrumental in producing space beyond the control of architects and planners. I wanted to explore how this "lived space" as Henri Lefebvre calls it, may be documented, represented and interpreted given that the representational methods I know frequently fails to include what is outside its immediate boundaries such as the spatial effects of use, habit, cultural norms, age, and decay.

The film *Three Flats* was produced in collaboration with independent film collective 13 Little Pictures. It is about home, domestic space, and homemaking, as seen through the spaces and practices of three single women. The choice of subjects is deliberate. Given that public housing caters primarily for the procreative family, they represent a segment of the population whose public views are uncommon, and often under-represented. Also, I confess an urgency to explore how the common perception attached to women in the domestic realm may be altered. As in Delacroix's *Three Women*, there is John Berger's remark in his iconic book *Ways of Seeing* in which he says:

*A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking and weeping.*³³

I was curious whether this stereotypical image could be transformed once women were given agency to their own spaces. That it may now be the audience consciously watching ourselves as we mentally traverse through

these homes, through interiors and details, which recall a forgotten childhood, or an intimate experience.

On another register, the research is concerned with tracing subtle differences across the three domestic spaces, as these spaces are used and altered by their occupants. It does not seek to generalise the findings to the entire public housing population but rather to demonstrate that domestic space is complex in its makeup being both functional (thus easily represented in architectural drawings) and emotive (mentally inscribed through memory, use, beliefs, superstitions, etc.). The nondescript stove, the lovingly tended potted plant, the crystal jars, which appear only during local festivities, the empty dining table, the antique sewing machine, the cluttered wardrobe, the unwieldy collection of books, sentimental toys and photographs—are given equal weight as with the spaces which hold them.

The pairing of domesticity with the cinematic is not remarkable. "No other medium of expression," as Cesare Zavattini reminds us "has cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things that we believe worth showing, as they happen day by day—in what we might call their "dailiness," their longest and truest duration."³⁴ For Lefebvre, the quotidian inscribes a "double space": "it is the residuum (of all possible specific and specialised activities outside social experience, and the product of society in general; it is the point of delicate balance and that where imbalance threatens."³⁵

Apart from recording duration, repetition, excess, and change, the filmic essay also, as Patrick Keiller describes, "offers a kind of permanence to subjectivity."³⁶ By this Keiller means that "one's transitory experience of some ordinary, everyday detail as breathtaking, euphoric or disturbing... can be registered on photographic emulsion and relived every time the material is viewed."³⁷ The medium of film offers an "ecstatic architecture," that is, an architecture of "heightened consciousness."³⁸

The "script" for the film was loosely developed in collaboration with Looi Wan Ping, who acted as the sole cameraman throughout the eight months of filming. Filming was done spontaneously, and as the camera panned each interior, the details captured betray our individual and joint preoccupations and memories—those of mine, Wan Ping, and the three occupants. It was not possible to shoot without getting

to know the three women more intimately. It was not possible to shoot just pure space without the occupants, their possessions, and their habits. In the end, there was also an unsaid responsibility towards some kind of preservation as we felt the need to safeguard these occupants, their spaces, stories, and secrets as much as a desire to air the accumulated footage for open discussion.

The three flats may be read as banal or unworthy of narration but the occupants' routines and the spaces they make are also elusive and hard to define. One may ask what is the "true" nature of these spaces, or what they represent as a collective, when in fact, the meanings and spaces of home in the three featured households (as with all households subject to similar quotidian events) are continually being revised, and thus, are both generic as well as unique. In the end, the disclosure of these spaces as a kind of generalised epistemology is necessarily partial. It attempts to address what Ivone Margulies identifies as key to deciphering home—an understanding of the quotidian as fragmented "material reality" as well as the "impossibility to fully account for it, to represent it."³⁹ In so doing, the film creates a space which intersects and acts as a counterpoint to the heroic monumentality often associated with the iconic representations of Singapore's public housing.

In the end, *Three Flats* poses some questions to its authors and its audience: What is home and what does it mean to those who live there? How can we represent what is necessarily a complex and becoming-space, which is an anchor for who we are, and yet always evolving? ■

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