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Keeping cats, hoarding things: domestic situations in the public spaces of the Singaporean housing block

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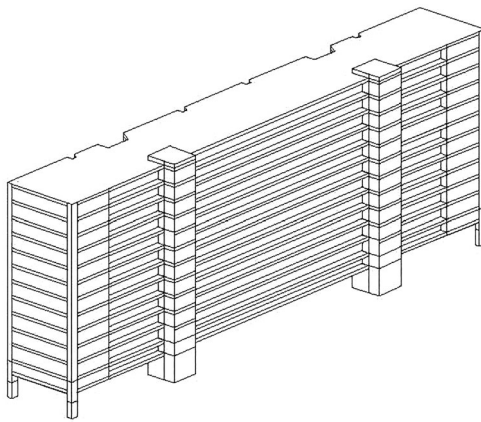
The architectural discourse of Singaporean public housing is focussed primarily on efficacy. Its performance has been substantiated heavily through statistics. Such a method not only presupposes implicit objectivity but ultimately also limits the kinds of perspectives and conclusions that can be drawn. This procedure has resulted in a more or less self-serving discourse wherein the aim of public housing has been principally framed as teleological, and subsequently traced and retraced through a progressive trajectory. However, in this paper, I argue that these standardised measures and methods fail when they are applied to two public spaces of the housing block—the void deck and the common corridor. These two spaces articulate the overlapping boundaries between two separate but often conflated categories: housing (embedding architectural type and state ideology) versus domesticity (embedding lived practice and spontaneous spatial production). I make the case that the discourse of efficacy ultimately represses the affective nature of these public spaces. The paper reappraises the void deck and the common corridor through the domestic situations of keeping cats and hoarding. I discuss how these situations can be adopted as critical spatial devices to allow a different entry into, and understanding of, the void deck and the common corridor. In conclusion, the paper posits that such spontaneous occupation of public space might offer a different frame for rethinking housing renewal and for understanding the changing role and use of housing's public space by its own multiple publics.

Introduction

In January, 2013, an elderly 'rag-and-bone' woman who collected discarded items for repurposing and resale was found sleeping rough on one of the staircases in Block 419, a public housing building located in the eastern Singaporean neighbourhood of Bedok North. More remarkably, when questioned Madam Ho, who was in her 60s, revealed that she owned a flat in the same block. She could no longer enter her unit because the items she had previously collected now obstructed access to her flat: 'I pick up things like cardboard, refrigerators and keep

them at home because I know I can sell them in the future. But around last year, some things fell and blocked my front door, that's why I can't go home ... I don't want to involve the police or SCDF to help me unlock my door and move things. I'm afraid of them.'¹ When volunteers offered to help clear the items and put them up for sale, Madam Ho declined, saying she preferred to be homeless rather than face the wrath of her immediate neighbours who had disputed her compulsive hoarding habits especially when items overflowed into the shared common corridor. The disputes ranged

Figure 1. The HDB's distinctive slab-block typology with void deck and common corridors, introduced in the early 1960s (drawing by Lin Derong).



from abusive threats to physical damage of her belongings. These included cigarette burns in her laundry and cups of 'yellow liquid' which turned out to be urine, placed outside her flat. Madam Ho's 'home' was subsequently reduced to a shopping trolley filled with her belongings. She lived off meal vouchers and sought assistance from the local community services. And despite Singapore's claimed efficient law enforcement, there has been no proper closure to this case.

I highlight this situation as a way of thinking through the litany of 'worry, ambiguity and concern'² which habitually pervades what this paper will call the 'public spaces' of public housing. By 'public spaces', I am referring to the shared spaces in the housing block, which do not have a specific domestic function yet are adjacent, or in close proximity, to the actual living quarters. I use the term 'public' intentionally to signal the tension between two entities: on the one hand,

what constitutes the private household realm of the flat where one has autonomy to act freely, and, on the other hand, what is *not* part of but is closely located to this private domestic environment. In this paper, I will look at two public spaces—the common corridor (a linear circulation space leading to the flats) and the void deck (an open public space on the ground level of the block), both of which featured in the 1970–1980s slab block public housing designs.

The common corridors with raised parapets stretched over fifty metres in length and typically adjoined twelve to sixteen flats. The 'free plan' ground floor with its *piloti* circumscribed the 'void deck', an open covered space parsimoniously delineated by the same column grid that supported the architecture of the block above it. Such geometries were specific to the distinctive slab block typology of public housing, also known locally as Housing Development Board, or HDB flats (Fig. 1). This typology was introduced in the early 1960s, popularised in the 1970s and last erected in 1985. The slab block primarily contained two-bedroom flats of modest size. A first-generation design, the slab block took on various shapes (Fig. 2) conforming to the urban exigencies of different housing estates.

The corridor and the void deck were constant features in this typology: their overall design remained relatively unchanged throughout a period of twenty years, whose purpose was to enact specific ideological intentions, and to solve practical issues. They were employed as part of a scalar solution to integrate individual families into larger communities thus mediating the overwhelming scale of a housing precinct. They were also important devices for

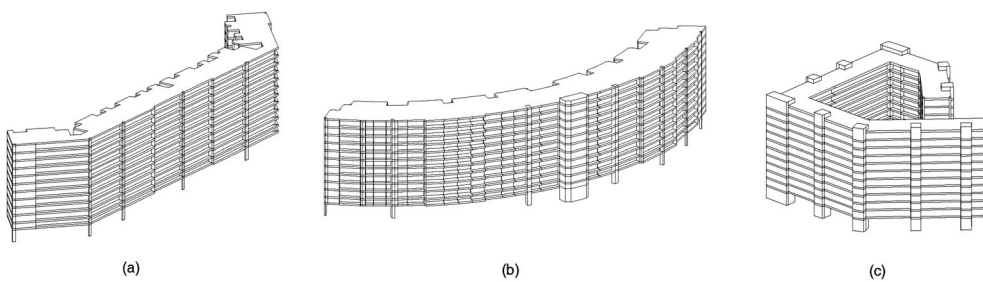


Figure 2. Iterations of the slab-block typology that conformed to the constraints of various housing estates included: (a) bent slab block (b) curved slab block (c) enclosing slab block (drawing by Lin Derong).

healthy and hygienic living since both spaces provided thorough ventilation and larger, open expanses for a densely packed population. As such, the void deck and the corridor are, at the same time, useful and ambiguous in nature. Yet, discourse on Singaporean public housing produced within the professional circles of architecture and urban planning in Singapore, including findings from research commissioned by the HDB, have only highlighted the utility and efficacy of this architecture. Are there other critical ways of perceiving and discussing these kinds of complex public spaces, which are also proximate and inseparable from the private? Can there be a more nuanced articulation of these spatial intersections between domesticity and housing, particularly pertaining to the interstitial public spaces wherein the void deck and the corridor are found?

In writing about the house as 'equipment' that is ultimately sustained by various institutions—'ownership, sexuality, kinship, family, lineage, technics, servitude, repression, civilization, privacy, intimacy'—Georges Teyssot reminds us that a piece of equipment is first and foremost necessarily economic in

nature: it produces a 'regime of normalization' that 'establishes limits (of property for example) and exclusions (between the forbidden and the permitted)'.³ Singaporean public housing architecture may be said to resemble such an instrument. It rehearses the pervasiveness of similar institutional limits and exclusions. It also exercises these norms by establishing what is 'proper', that is, by normalising what is in fact specific or even exceptional in its architectural design and intentions.

Domesticity is filled with both major and minor 'disturbances', which are, however, subsumed into the realm of ordinariness. These situations do not normally feature in architectural discourse. In using the domestic situation to re-encounter public housing, I am suggesting that such situations, which are the outcomes of occupancy and use, raise issues which would otherwise be 'under the radar' of normative architectural discourse, which is focussed exclusively on questions of design.

This paper intervenes in various discursive frames. First, it offers a social and ethnographical perspective for evaluating Singapore-based architectural discourse on public housing. Adding a new dimension

to critical architectural histories on Singaporean public housing—including, particularly, Eunice Seng's doctoral dissertation *Habitation and Invention of a Nation: Singapore, 1936–1979*,⁴ which approaches public housing history from official newspaper records and photographs, state policy and public speeches—this essay emphasises instead the importance of occupancy (human and non-human) to review the social and psychological impact of public housing architecture. It argues for an affective architectural discourse based upon occupancy-based evidence, and discusses the politics of including occupancy and affect in a critical evaluation of Singaporean public housing.

Secondly, the essay develops and reframes the architectural inquiry into public housing by situating architecture as critically co-produced or re-produced through domestic practice. Housing is categorically differentiated from domesticity. Domesticity is concerned with *minutiae*, and undergirded by agents and forces normally located outside architectural concerns, including occupancy, consumerist behaviours and cultural habits. Domestic situations move the study of architecture beyond its design stage. Many scholars have demonstrated that architecture is continually re-produced through occupancy.⁵ Nevertheless, the insertion of the occupant as an agent of architectural production in the context of public housing, particularly Singaporean public housing, is significant given that this typology is exclusively expressive of state identity and policy. Thus, the argument of public housing space as populist is not just new but critical of the normatively hierarchical conception of public housing whose knowledge conforms to pure design intentionality.

The essay challenges such conventional architectural conceptions of public housing in Singapore and elsewhere by reframing the architectural space through lived evidence and affective experiences. The ground floor open space or 'void deck' is examined through the traces of the housing block's cat population, whilst the common corridor space is approached through the hoarding of things. Anthropological, ethnographical and geographical studies of human-animal social/spatial relationships as well as material cultural studies on the affective/infrastuctural spaces of rubbish and waste are key to reinterpreting how occupancy engages and transforms architecture. Through this mode, architectural discourse acknowledges that the production of architecture through occupation is necessarily organic, open-ended and experiential in ways that conventional architectural evidence can neither sufficiently record nor express. In doing so, this essay also re-contextualises literature on the circulation of subjects (both human and nonhuman), practices, and ideas related to domestic environments derived from material culture, social history, as well as anthropological, geographical and ethnographical studies, within a new architectural discourse focussed on the affective realm of public housing.

Thirdly and finally, the essay contributes a non-Western case study, both adding to and re-envisioning late twentieth-century European and North American debates on public housing. These well-rehearsed debates revolved around public housing's socialist ideals, aimed at better living standards and new modes of living. Examples include the radical modernist architectural plans of the *Weissenhof Siedlung* (1927) in Stuttgart, comprising twenty-one

buildings for sixty working-class families designed by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Hans Scharoun amongst others; the Soviet experiment in low-cost, prefabricated industrialised housing (*Khrushchyovka*), beginning in the late 1950s under Nikita Khrushchev's *dictat* to stamp out all architectural excess and creating hundreds of suburbs or *mikrorayons*;⁶ and arguably the most famous high-rise public housing project of the last century, the architect Minoru Yamasaki's St Louis' Pruitt-Igoe (1954), which was originally developed for a middle-class community, but in under two decades became an architectural shorthand for dysfunctional mass housing riddled with social problems, racial violence, crime and urban decay.

These discussions persistently positioned public housing not only as a reluctant solution to an insurmountable social problem of urban congestion, but also decried the strategy of public housing as overtly hierarchical, a top-down approach which was often completely out of touch with the thousands who subsequently became its beneficiaries. In other words, public housing was a byword for architectural hegemony and its subsequent failure at a monumental scale. In her 1967 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, the architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, who visited Moscow to examine its public housing on the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian revolution, described as advanced the technological progress enabling the rapid roll out of standardised flats but lamented that 'it looks promising, measured at one inch to 100 feet, but becomes inhuman when measured out in footsteps'.⁷ As Huxtable observes, the optics of public housing is deeply entrenched at the urban scale whilst simultaneously

alienating and subjugating knowledges and experiences on the ground. If the architectural scale of public housing is emphasised, as in the *Weissenhof Siedlung* or Le Corbusier's still iconic *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles, the knowledge of architectural lineage and design are ultimately prioritised over the production of that architecture through occupancy.

As a corollary to extant debates on public housing, this paper offers a critical theoretical overview of the Singaporean case by what can be 'measured out in footsteps'. The early social housing experiments in Europe and the United States stood at the frontiers of architectural production but their socio-cultural conditions were hostile to the concept of mass housing. The Soviet example is resonant with Singaporean public housing given that the body politic of the Russian state was ideologically embedded in its rapidly disseminated industrialised blocks. However, with the shift of the urban economy from production to speculation, the Singaporean example may be differentiated from the Soviet *Khrushchyovka* because public housing continues to be built (while the Soviet experiment stopped in 1971), controlled and popularly supported whereby it is the housing choice of more than eighty-percent of Singapore's resident population. Thus, this paper offers a study not just of an exceptionally successful non-Western condition but more significantly, a ground-up perspective of an architectural typology which, in both Western and non-Western examples, has tended to be read through and expressed exclusively as normalised components of state ideologies and urban planning technologies.⁸

The first two sections of this paper reexamine the histories of, and motivations for, the void deck and the corridor. It discusses the construction of the proper and propriety in public housing, and argues how its discourse cultivates a normalisation of the HDB's design intentions. It also points out how the discourse's objective voice begins to break down when it is applied to the void deck and the corridor. The final section argues for an architectural reappraisal of the domestic situation in order to articulate a more nuanced reading of the public spaces in the housing block. Though the situations—cats in the void deck and clutter in the corridor—have been summarily dismissed as nuisance, they raise difficult questions about territoriality. They also highlight dissent between the idea of a shared national housing project and the liberties assumed of the domestic realm. What do these situations reveal about the architecture of public housing and its normalised discourse?

Just repeat it: drawing the normal in public housing

In 1960, the rise of public housing as a systematic political and social instrument in the newly independent nation state of Singapore combined pragmatic and ideological will. The initial impetus to solve a housing crisis in the late 1950s transformed into a convenient mechanism for citizen-making when, in 1964, the newly launched homeownership scheme soon co-opted every willing citizen and homeowner into a binding and contractual relationship with the state. The former were transformed into stakeholders.⁹ 'My primary preoccupation,' declared the first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, 'was to give

every citizen a stake in the country and its future. I wanted a home-owning society. I ... was convinced that if every family owned its home, the country would be more stable ...'.¹⁰ The state enabled such stake-holding¹¹ through generous housing grants, rebate schemes, family bonuses for generational proximity between households and heavily subsidised prices for newly built flats that appreciated quickly in value once the property entered the open market. On their part, the new homeowners could lay claim to the country's then fledgling economy, and they too rapidly evolved into a citizenry who understood the criticality of vigour and discipline in a thriving labour force.¹² HDB ownership facilitated 'the expansion of commitment to the prevalent social order by the development of personal stakes in its survival'.¹³

Thus, the home ownership ideology forged a more enduring if also complex relationship with the state wherein basic shelter was guaranteed only if proper occupancy requirements were met and maintained, including uninterrupted servicing of the monthly mortgage. However, home ownership involved more than financial stability on the part of the citizenry. Public housing was a tool for managing the population, and here, the national imperatives of birth control, family planning and racial quotas weighed heavily upon home ownership regulations.¹⁴ In 1973, for instance, in a bid to engineer smaller families amongst the less highly educated population, one of the spouses who included a female work permit holder married to a Singaporean had to agree to 'sterilization after birth of the second child or lose government housing subsidy and other concessions'.¹⁵ The

sociologist Chua Beng-Huat argues that public housing is framed within an 'explicit ideological language' intent on defining the proper Singaporean citizen.¹⁶

Thus, the achievement of Singaporean public housing is neither its historical eradication of squatter housing and disease-ridden environments nor the intensity of its architectural solutions. Public housing is omnipresent in the national psyche. With more than 82% of the population subscribing to this housing programme, it is almost impossible to remain outside this pervasive architectural milieu. Monopolising the Singaporean domestic environment and designed as a total environment covering a range of scales and spaces from the individual flat to the block, the larger neighbourhood and the greater precinct, it ultimately shapes the resident's worldview. Public housing in Singapore is all encompassing. In its capacity physically and psychically to hold a nation, the HDB flat thus cannot be compared to any other architecture either in Singapore or beyond its shores.

It is simultaneously the most common *and* the most aspirational of architectures. Unlike social housing elsewhere, which tends to be stigmatised, the HDB block houses a national microcosm: 'financially-challenged families, solid blue-collar families, and also the upper middle class and young upwardly-mobile professionals'.¹⁷ The citizen who qualifies for such housing is shaped by public campaigns and programmes targeted to alter their social behaviour and personal disposition with regard to productivity, public hygiene, neighbourliness, family planning, energy use, moral values and speaking Mandarin, amongst others.

From 1968 to 1982, 66 campaigns were launched, and many of these found their way into HDB conditions for grants, ownership policies and regulations: 'In the home, citizens are instructed on family size, the timing of household formation and child birth, the language they ought to speak, are compulsorily required to save a fifth of their income, and since 1996, to financially support their parents in old age.'¹⁸

Yet ironically, in responding to the nation's utopian dream of housing the 'good life', the architectural motivation is premised on efficacy. HDB's founding chief architect-planner Liu Thai Ker describes a 'single-minded pragmatic approach',¹⁹ which focussed on 'improved sanitation, improved floor space, improved floor plan and improved amenities rather than on an ideal approach or an ideal building plan based on sociological studies'.²⁰ This purposefully neutralised and function-driven approach differentiated the architectural outcomes of the Singaporean model from the idealisms embedded in Westernised conceptions of modernist housing projects. Le Corbusier declared that modern architecture's efficiency stood for a particular ethics and morality: '*Standardization, mass production, efficiency*: three connected phenomena that rule contemporary activity pitilessly, that are neither cruel nor atrocious, but on the contrary lead to order, to perfection, to purity, to liberty.'²¹ Thus, for modernism, the raised standards of living and their modes of efficiency were not ends in themselves. These were means to a better 'life', a quantum which Liu openly declared as too vague a goal for a performance-oriented organisation like the HDB.²² Indeed, Liu's pragmatism towards mod-

ernist architecture, with its focus on holding the family unit together and creating homes for a stable workforce, is not only productivist but might also be culturally and theoretically differentiated as an anti-Western approach to modernism.

The primacy of the collective workforce with the family as an economically and biologically productive unit steered the agenda of Singaporean public housing. In fact, the HDB's enduring architectural legacy of enforced neutrality and muteness permeates its design and programmatic approach. The HDB flats are, as the geographer Jane M. Jacobs observes, ironically distinguished by their perceived 'lack' of design and/or designer.²³ Compared to public housing's ideological ambitions and complicated ownership regulations, its architecture has seemingly evolved out of a mechanical and objective process.

Paradoxically, whilst the nation-building policies defining public housing were arguably utopian, ideological and sometimes even radical—with strategies including universal stake-holding, ownership regulations and grants premised on marriage, restrictions on non-familial ownership configurations, and regulated racial quotas—the architectural approach was conversely conservative. Functionality and efficiency were readily adopted as the architectural baseline. In Liu's early papers on public housing, these parameters formed the basis for a new architecture for the masses. Liu's arguments focussed on how variations in flat and block designs had 'functional objectives' determined by and affecting land use and its optimisation, planning controls, development processes and policies, facilities planning and distribution, new town plan-

ning, and the compelling need to standardise the land-use distribution, density and layout of the HDB estates across Singapore.²⁴ Such an instrumentalised architectural rhetoric and functional design approach have ultimately influenced a perception of public housing architecture as one driven completely by pragmatism.

Thus, juxtaposed against the radical social reforms and configurations articulated in Singaporean public housing policy, the architectures of block, precinct and neighbourhood appear conversely to be grounded in the quantifiable and the measurable. Yet, I suggest that the pragmatic character of public housing architecture had a performative role. This objective positioning became a mute foil for a series of contestable ideologies of nation, society and family. As the most visible physical expression of national policy, the architecture of the public housing block was purposely cast as neutral. Through its neutralised rhetoric and seemingly banal aesthetics, the standardised architecture of public housing achieved an almost *a priori* ontological status—one that was ultimately indisputable because it was seen as a mechanical and automatic response to function *per se*. Its reason for being was to enable positive living outcomes including better sanitation, hygiene, fresh air, bigger flats and better interior layouts. If the idiosyncratic policies provoked debate, the automated gesture of the architecture achieved the exact opposite: it normalised.

The architectural theorist Catherine Ingraham situates the 'normal' as entangled with 'propriety' and implicit in the concept of 'property'.²⁵ Delimiting the premises of modern space on 'proper-

ness, normativeness, cleanliness, comfort, the cogito,²⁶ Ingraham traces the word 'normal' first to its Latin root 'norma' that 'etymologically (refers to) a T-square, normal is that which bends neither to the right nor the left',²⁷ and then, through the historian of science Georges Canguilhem's definition, where the idea of the normal becomes much more ambiguous, since it has the joint status of imposed value and indisputable fact. 'Normal ... is that which is met in the majority of cases of a *determined* kind, or that which constitutes either the average or standard of a *measurable* characteristic.'²⁸ The normal is thus not a self-evident category but an artificially regulated one. It is necessarily bolstered by measurable quantities which redress the biases and exclusions which normalisation automatically installs.

In the architecture of Singaporean public housing, the 'etymological cohorts'²⁹ of property, propriety and the proper are productively developed. Personal stake-holding in such property is based on the prerequisite that a proper family unit is already in place, defined as 'one man, one woman, marrying, having children'³⁰ and further, that this basic unit will necessarily exercise appropriate kinship relationships between family, neighbour and citizenry, with the three categories being non-exclusive. These values are shored up by an architecture whose variations of flat size, interior layout and public spaces in the block have, over the years, shifted in tandem with national family-planning policies, community-centric campaigns and nation-building enterprises. Ingraham proposes that architecture's propriety is not, however, limited to 'typologically appropriate buildings' but that it fundamentally serves as a

'housing for the proper inside other disciplines and other discourses'.³¹ Similarly, I argue that the objectified and neutralised characteristics of HDB architecture both accommodate and normalise a value system founded on the hetero-normative and economically productive family unit. Further, if 'the architect is still understood to be a kind of physician for the (normative) body in space',³² then HDB architecture inevitably reinforces this body politic through its design and spatial logic.

'HDB existence is characterized', attests the Singaporean poet Alfian Sa'at, 'by aerial threats, where a mouth expels its contents, a hand dispatches its cargo, before withdrawing back into a planar anonymity (which one hides the culprit, one wonders, looking up), where a primary accomplice to misfortune is gravity.'³³ Sa'at's account delineates a deeply affective space populated by *sputum*, discarded sweet wrappers and dirt. It leads us directly to where these tensions brew: at the edges of two colliding territories, where the housing block's public space chafes against the flat's private domestic space. He reveals that the riskiest spaces are those just around the corner from his flat: on the common staircase and at the edges of the void deck (Fig. 3). At this public-private threshold, interdictions, breaches and situations spontaneously unfold as if to reinforce the tripartite relationship of property, propriety and the proper. Yet instead of fortifying the normative, domesticity's excesses thrive on impropriety, thwarting alignment with housing's proper intents. Approaching the architectural histories, motivations and spatial outcomes of two boundary conditions within a housing block—the void deck and the common corridor—the next

Figure 3. The insalubrious boundaries of the HDB void deck, 2016 (photograph by Tan Jing Min).



section offers a counter-narrative of the housing block from within its public spaces.

... what such open space might do: undermining efficacy

The rationale for open space in Singaporean public housing was historically driven by health. Miasmatic discourse was common in the British Empire and produced various models of 'hygienic' architecture, including the discipline of tropical architecture.³⁴ The problem of disease was a problem of space. Congestion and overcrowding in the city centre were endemic. In 1947, up to 100,000 people lived in slums.³⁵ The British colonial government perceived these slums as an uncontrollable rot that ate at the city. Occupants lacked legal rights, access to infrastructure and escaped municipal surveillance. Consequently, the 1955 Masterplan³⁶ sought to map and eradicate such squalor. By its final year of operation in 1959, the colonial administration's housing body—the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT)—managed to build only 23,000 homes.³⁷ In actuality, the rehousing of squatters required ten times as

many. Further, the housing crisis was explicitly presented as a problem of space: the slums provided a miserly 0.35 hectares of open space per person in comparison to the UK standard of 4.5 hectares per person. Thus, the 1955 Masterplan emphasised the necessity and urgency of open space as a baseline for hygiene and health. At the same time, it described the significance of open space's 'pleasantness' (an excessive if also unquantifiable value) because it was perceived that open spaces could enhance communal relationships.

Open space was thus conceptualised in public housing for hygiene and health.³⁸ Its pragmatism was also extended to forging communal ties. The naming of the two spaces—the ground-level open space called the 'void deck' (Fig. 4) and the multi-level open space called the 'access balcony' (Fig. 5)—offered little to imply communality and flexibility of use. This suggests that the motives for delineating the programmatic possibilities of such space were nascent and, perhaps, even ambiguous. Certainly, the question of control, use and maintenance of these open, loosely programmed, spaces would have posed issues for the HDB, although any anxieties were not documented.

The earliest void deck was reputedly constructed in 1963 at Block 26 Jalan Klinik, an estate located at the fringe of the city centre.³⁹ It was little publicised and appeared more like a residual space between facilities on the ground level, including the stair-core lobbies, a provisions shop and areas housing building services. There were no void decks in the first HDB township of Toa Payoh when that estate was established in 1964. This changed in the mid-1970s when almost every



Figure 4. The HDB void deck, 2017
(photograph by Lin Derong).

block contained one.⁴⁰ Similarly, the HDB annual reports did not refer to this space at all until as late as 1977–78.⁴¹ However, in 1968, a decade prior to the popularisation of the void deck as a vernacularised open space in public housing, its spatial potentials were highlighted in the *Singapore Institute of Architects Journal (SIAJ)*.⁴²

In this, the first significant mention of the HDB ‘void deck’ as a purposely designed open space was made in reference to the Park Road develop-

ment, a pilot project of the state-initiated, inner-city core Comprehensive Urban Renewal programme: this sought to intensify land use, modernise development and clear up the urban slums. The void deck described in the *SIAJ*’s article refers to an open-access roof-top space on the third level of a city podium block (Fig. 6). Here, the void deck had the function of separating the commercial podium below from the residential flats above. The void deck in Park Road ‘act(ed) as a buffer zone to

Figure 5. The 'access balcony' or common corridor, 2017 (photograph by Lin Derong).



promote cross-ventilation and lighten the appearance of the building' and 'serve(d) as play and recreational areas for residents'.⁴³ It housed a *crèche* with landscaping and a pool for children's play, a kindergarten, a reading corner and a recreational area for adults (Fig. 7). According to Alan Choe, then the HDB's chief architect, the city was an 'unhealthy environment' that bred 'delinquency, crime, prostitution, dope as well as neurotic diseases'.⁴⁴ Thus, at its earliest stages, the void deck was employed to separate the residential units from the supposedly corrupting influences of the urban milieu. It functioned in the same way as the

European urban planning concept of the *cordon sanitaire*, or a zone of exclusion, in and through which the damaging aspects of city life could be mediated or filtered out. Choe's understanding of the void deck as an urban zone of exclusion is significant in how the void deck is understood as untethered to the block but necessarily a part of the city. Its scale, anonymity, and ambiguous boundaries lead the void deck to being perceived and used in ways which are consistent with an urban space but simultaneously contentious in the context of a residential block.

However, when the HDB transferred this open space to the suburban housing estates in the 1970s, the same conditions of city-versus-flat no longer applied. The ambition shifted to understanding the void deck as part of a series of spatially defined and enclosed 'outdoor spaces'.⁴⁵ Yet, its morphology defied this simple re-categorisation. Defined by the extrusion of the structural grid of the flats above it, it repeated and reinforced their spatial rhythm. The void deck was porous to its surroundings but at the same time spatially independent of what was adjacent to it (Fig. 8). Surrounded by a raised apron that defined the block from the ground plane, the edges of the void deck were also marked by specific architectural points of exit for occupants and their waste: stair and lift cores opened to one side of the block mirrored by refuse chutes and waste water stacks at the other side. The open space of the void deck was, as such, a space suspended between these circulatory modes of people and their discards. It had a vague sense of both belonging to, and yet not of, the block of flats. The void deck's 'public' character

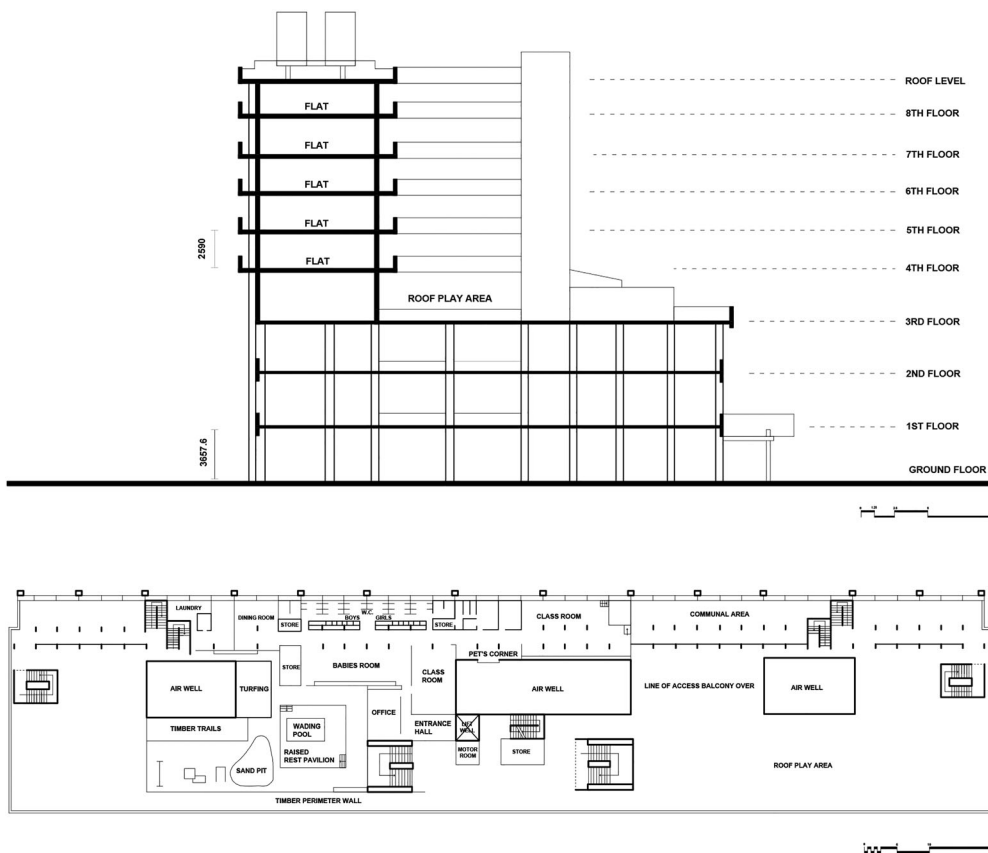


Figure 6. Typical Section of the Park Road development showing the open-access roof area and void deck, separating the commercial podium from the residential flats above (drawing by Lin Derong).

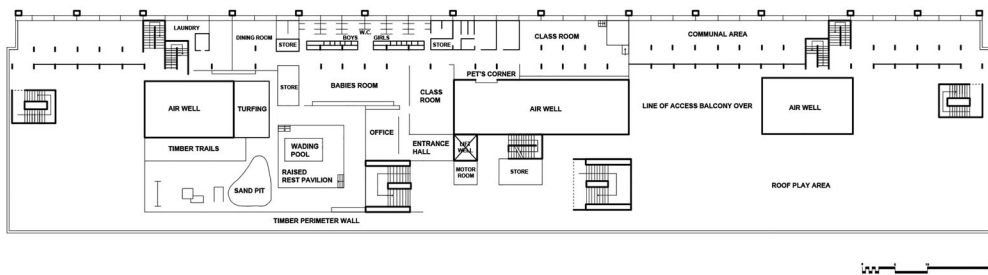


Figure 7. Typical third-floor plan of the Park Road development showing recreational areas for residents (drawing by Lin Derong).

was ambiguously 'domestic' and 'other' at the same time.

Consequently, its spatial and programmatic ambiguity was at odds with the rigidly circumscribed system of open space in public housing, which included spaces such as the playground, the town

square and the hawker centre. Defined by clear physical boundaries and use patterns, these spaces also reinforced the orthodoxies of efficiency and pragmatism prevalent in the architectures of public housing. Whilst the urban planning mechanisms invested heavily in a higher-order planning hierarchy

Figure 8. The spatially porous void deck, 2017 (photograph by Lin Derong).



in the town centre,⁴⁶ the proper usage of the void deck was subsequently left to interpretation and appropriation. Conspicuously populated during family gatherings including weddings and funerals, the void deck often emerges as a space rife with troublesome situations. These situations sometimes bordered on minor offences: 'people sleeping overnight, parking cars, littering, gambling, smoking, drug taking, and the presence—and occasional abuse—of cats.'⁴⁷ In this casual list, the void deck appeared to accommodate both the excess relationships of a domestic space and an almost absurd catalogue of a-social behaviour that intrinsically represented the diversity of domestic life concealed within the tightly ordered and managed spaces of the HDB flats. Through these occurrences, the void deck shifted in its intended role from *cordon sanitaire* to being itself a salacious territory that needed to be kept in check, or sometimes avoided altogether.

A similar tension might be detected in another public space within the block. The common corridor

or 'access balcony' runs alongside the front façade of the housing block. Tectonically, the corridor was established as an important architectural element. In the early Singapore Improvement Trust flats,⁴⁸ including the nine-storey blocks in Upper Pickering Street (1952–53) and the fourteen-storey Forfar House (1955), the access balcony or corridor acted as a distinct 'form-giver'⁴⁹ by providing the characteristically clean, striated modernist façades. Installed initially as a circulation passage, the access balcony was further developed to enhance social interaction between neighbours on the same floor. Adjustments to the design of the corridor dealt primarily with altering sightlines from the corridor into the private flat, and experimenting with different dimensions to facilitate spontaneous socialisation. To address issues of privacy, the level of the corridor was lowered so it would eventually sit half-a-metre below the flats that adjoined it. Through the years, there have been several variations in the resizing of its width—ranging between 1.4 metres and 2.4 metres—such that the corridor became not just a site for moving to and from the flats but also a space in which to linger, encounter, engage and survey (Fig. 9).

Liu wrote of how the raised units overlooking the corridor would 'give the impression of houses along a street'.⁵⁰ Indeed, the corridor was instrumentalised as a social condenser. It was constructed with an explicit aim of creating a community of neighbours who lived side-by-side but whose increasingly atomised existence rendered them strangers to each other. Yet, the provision of the corridor catered to more than space for the exchange of pleasantries. It had the double-edged function of interaction

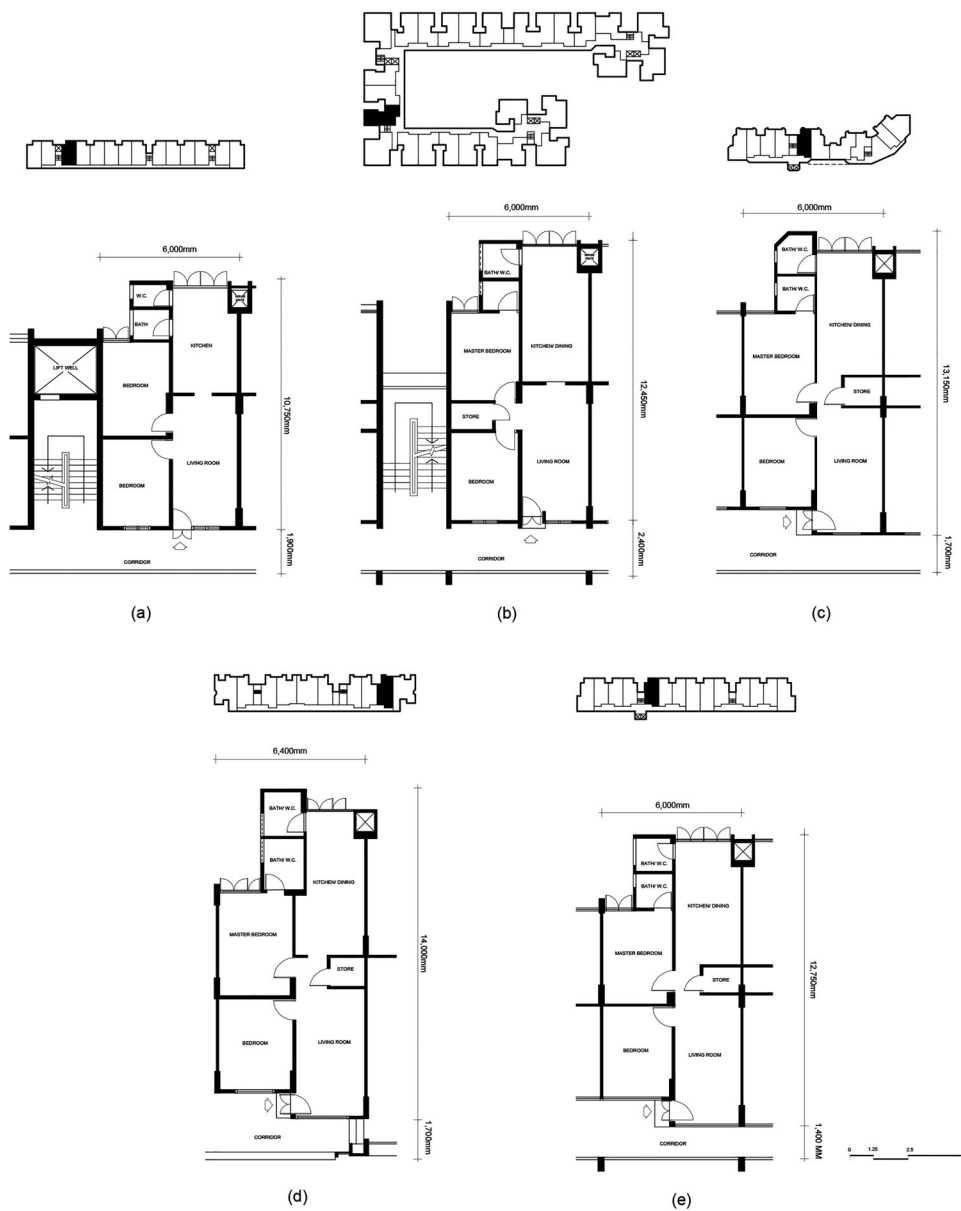


Figure 9. Iterations of 3-room HDB units: (a) Improved flat 1975-76; (b) New flat 1975-76; (c) New flat 1979-80; (d) Model A 1981-82; (e) New flat 1981-82 (drawings by Lin Derong).

and surveillance: its visibility meant that comings and goings could be monitored by the 'houses along a street'. Whether or not such acts of surveillance happened, the corridor became a panoptic and self-regulating space where irregularities were quickly exposed: 'the extroverted corridor was a corroborator in the celebration of publicness and the suppression of privacy'.⁵¹ As Eunice Seng suggests, the corridor, in such an architectural configuration and context, repositioned publicness as demonstrative of that which was desired in the proper citizen-worker-homeowner-family member. The visibility of the corridor generated expectations of openness but at the same time reinforced specific standards undergirding the institutions of family and nation. At stake in this narrow space were complex issues of security, ownership and territory.

Architecture can produce certain kinds of bodies just as different kinds of bodies co-produce particular kinds of architecture. Henri Lefebvre argues that spaces emanate particular 'energies' which are then played out through the users' relationships to those spaces: 'A body so conceived, as produced and as the production of a space, is immediately subject to the determinants of that space. ... the spatial body's material character derives from space, from the energy that is deployed and put to use there.'⁵² Lefebvre's provocation about space's energetic impulse begins to describe the ambiguous condition in the void deck and the corridor. The body, he tells us, reacts not merely to geometry and form but is galvanised by almost every quality coincident with that space, including interactions, oppositions, centres and edges. In Lefebvre's statement, space is produced through and by these

aspects, both what is quantifiable and what is not. Amidst the network of over-determined public housing spaces with their pre-programmed national and familial expectations, the void deck and the corridor stand out in their spatial and programmatic ambiguity. They constituted public space in public housing but their proximate relationship through geometry, distance and overlapping boundaries with the private flat gave way to dissonance. Certainly, if the tightly regulated dwelling and civic spaces of public housing were intent on producing a disciplined citizen-homeowner-worker, then the loosely regulated transition public spaces of the void deck and the corridor were appealing in their unintended liberalism. It is significant that these two spaces were inadequately described, catalogued and understood through HDB's characteristic statistical enumerations. Through this mode, they appeared feeble and excessive. Viewed through the categories of efficiency and use, they were perceived as defiant and bothersome.

Rather, these spaces seemed pragmatic only when they were beset by some troubling situation: the corridor's parapet wall was raised to a one-metre height when it was suggested that some had found it convenient to leap to their deaths from there;⁵³ the void deck was slowly filled up with more useful communal spaces such as a crèche, a kindergarten, shared meeting rooms or an old persons' corner to minimise unauthorised usage as harmless as playing football and washing one's motorbike, or more risqué gambling and spontaneous gatherings of non-Singaporean residents.⁵⁴ Articulated in these ways, the void deck and corridor's effectiveness could not be gauged through

functionality. Instead these problematic situations highlighted what was spatially different about these spaces—that they were always encountered as contradictory: efficient and inefficient; clean and dirty; outside and inside. Such situations also suggest that here architecture, as the efficient machine which this public housing programme promoted, ultimately breaks down. It can no longer control the body, which ‘is not only prone to but thrives on the tensions between propriety and impropriety’.⁵⁵

This article’s final section concludes by looking more closely at two recent domestic situations which have pathologised the void deck and the corridor. Through the instances of hoarding in the corridor and keeping cats in the void deck, I discuss how these domestic situations highlight spatial particularities especially where these two public spaces intersect domestic territories and practices. These spaces are eventually defined by the ambiguity of their boundaries, and are remarkable in how they prompt action and emotion. I draw from ethnographic evidence and engage theories on waste, excess and animal-human relationships, bringing these areas in proximity to the discourse of public housing and its architectural design. How is this architecture—built on a certainty of numbers, perfected through utilitarian calculus, conceived and constructed with the utmost respect for lineaments and intentions—unravelling at these points?

Of clutter and cats: domesticating housing

In August, 2012, neighbours in a Singaporean public housing block at Bedok Reservoir complained of a stench permeating their corridor.⁵⁶ The remains of

a 76-year-old Singaporean man were subsequently found in a two-bedroom flat along the corridor. Rubbish collected over the past decade by the man was piled floor to ceiling and obstructed the search for his body, which took at least an hour. In several cases, such as Madam Ho’s highlighted at the beginning of this essay, the hoarder was driven out of his/her flat because it became inaccessible. Hazards posed to neighbours were just as disconcerting. In May, 2015, workers from the Singapore National Environment Agency sprayed insecticide in a block at Eunos Crescent to destroy an active dengue cluster in the estate.⁵⁷ Subsequently, hundreds of cockroaches from a hoarder’s two-bedroom flat invaded the corridor. A neighbour who posted a video of the cockroach-infested corridor on social media described how other flats along the same corridor were made vicariously to experience the perils of hoarding when swarms of insects and cockroaches turned up in their flats. Here, the corridor was transformed into an undesirable conduit for infestation and disease. It becomes a threat to property, which together with propriety and the proper, constitute the architectural norm.⁵⁸

Neil Maycroft and Sylvia Lavin⁵⁹ discuss hoarding as involving ultimately improper matter placed improperly in space; that is, the hoard becomes an architectural situation only when it fails to ‘move along’ to more ‘marginal’ areas of storage. It is the non-proper positioning of questionable things in non-marginal, visible domestic space that creates trouble. ‘Sorting and classification have a spatial dimension: this goes here, that goes there. *Nontrash* belongs in the house; trash goes outside. Marginal categories get sorted in marginal places (attics, base-

ments, and outbuildings) eventually to be used, sold or given away ...'.⁶⁰

There is an alternate order to the hoard, which has as its primary aim continuous accumulation in order to fill up space: 'usually working from periphery to centre, sometimes carving out elaborate pathways or structures in order to enable functional day to day living, and often, more hoarding'.⁶¹ Maycroft argues that hoarding breaks with storage conventions and challenges 'values' attributed not only to commodities but also towards space. In architectural terms, hoarding has a devastating impact on domestic space. It not only paralyses commonsensical spatial use but completely undermines its order and propriety. Hoarding violates the '"visible" space of the everyday' by desecrating the '"proper" ordering of objects in space'.⁶² The hoard is precisely an architectural situation because it questions and breaks down accepted spatial boundaries and conventions: 'Hoarding might just as well be described as a critical resistance to the regimes of propriety enforced by architecture or as a means of understanding space that is not just resistant to standard measures of use, but ignores them altogether'.⁶³

In the Singaporean context, the problem of hoarding is compounded by the close proximity between individual flats, and specifically worsened by the territorial ambiguity inherent in the long, linear and uninterrupted corridors abutting the fronts of these flats. Indeed, the spatial logic of hoarding thrives on ambiguity in organisation, with the hoarder actively transforming the constituency of space in his/her turning of void (useable rooms) into solid forms (walls of rubbish). The fact that hoarding has become something of a situation in the context of

public housing ironically rehearses the question of open space. Here, open space is no longer marked by its habitual use or by its efficacy. The open space of the corridor motivates hoarding; it encourages and is sympathetic to a spillover from the flat into its outside (figs 10, 11).

It should be reiterated that the spillover corridor space is not just a lure for hoarders. It is habitually treated as a surplus space adjoining the private flat. At this private-public threshold, occupants store an assortment of objects—including plants, footwear, religious paraphernalia and altars, bicycles, scooters, laundry—and use the corridor for temporary religious practices, such as the Indian population's drawing of the *mandala* on the floor or the setting up of small tables for offerings and prayers during key Chinese festivals. What is left in the corridor and the manner by which these objects are found reveal a lot for their disposition, whether maintaining a precarious equilibrium of 'acceptable' storage, or veering towards disorder and decay.

If unwanted objects are routinely placed in unprogrammed spaces which are also typically obscured from public view—such as the attic, the storeroom or the bottom of the garden—the positioning of the loosely programmed common corridor in relation to the flat defies this convention. Whilst it affords a certain laxity of use and remains vague in terms of its spatial affiliation to the flat, the corridor is at the same time prominently positioned at the front of the block. It is simultaneously and conflictingly, a loose and a self-regulating space. Its patent visibility automatically presupposes a certain norm of propriety. It demands an order that



Figure 10. The common corridor and its spillover capacity, 2017 (photograph by Lin Derong).



Figure 11. Permanent 'hoarding' of domestic objects in the common corridor, 2017 (photograph by Lin Derong).

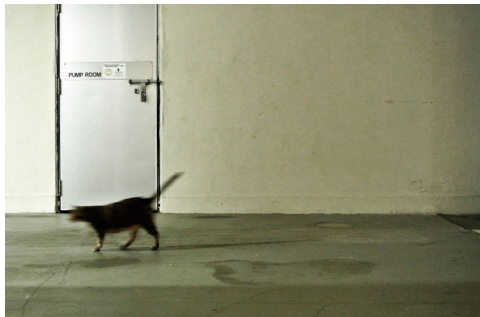
preserves this space as a 'front' and its visibility entails proper use of it. When such propriety is violated by the hoarder and hoarding, the corridor shifts from an efficient façade into an affective space, punctuated by an overtly corporeal existence that cannot be contained. Putrid smells, the organic growth of fungi and mould, infestations of cockroaches, insects and rats, peculiar deposits and stains, and the slow degeneration of harmless consumables, such as newspapers, books, clothes, rags, empty plastic containers and broken electrical goods, into something more sinister and obscure, beckon at every turn. In the wrong place, what

was once prosaic and domestic becomes abject, threatening and repulsive.

Similarly at the ground-level void deck, the nightly prowling of illegally kept street or community cats confound the differentiated boundaries between inside and outside, clean and dirty, private and public, legal and illicit. There are, officially, sixty thousand street cats in Singapore.⁶⁴ In 2013, the HDB received 260 pet-related complaints, of which 150 were cat related. Since September, 1978, HDB regulates what it calls 'HDB-approved' pets, which include smaller dog breeds, birds, hamsters and rabbits.⁶⁵ Cats have been excluded from the approved list because they are deemed ungovernable: 'It does not follow the grid system of the city. It does not walk on a leash and cannot be trained. It is unpredictable, nocturnal, transgressive.'⁶⁶

Pets are supposed to be contained within a household, where they have a proper place. The dog, which is allowed in the HDB flat, is always accompanied and restrained when it moves

Figure 12. An illegal cat
roaming a HDB void
deck, 2016
(photograph by Tan Jing
Min).



outside the flat. Conversely, it is difficult to keep cats indoors. The cat disobeys any kind of spatial demarcation. The HDB website states: 'when allowed to roam indiscriminately, they tend to shed fur and defecate or urinate in public areas, and also make caterwauling sounds, which can inconvenience your neighbours'.⁶⁷ As such, cats are banned as pets in public housing. Yet, in any block, illegally kept cats can be found resting around staircase landings, or strolling nonchalantly along the corridors and void decks (Fig. 12).

Like the hoard, the cat not only transgresses spatial limits, it is also regarded as a risk, a vector of contagion that may pollute the environment in its ability to carry something improper into the flat:

... 'putting the cat out at night' signals incomplete containment in the home, only a partial domestication, even though cats may be cosmetically modified to fit conceptions of the homely and domestic. Similarly, the cat-flap is a breach in the domestic boundary, and cats bringing mice or birds into the home may still be seen as pollu-

ters of domestic space. In this respect, pet cats are transgressive, breaking the boundary between nature and culture.⁶⁸

Considering that the void deck historically was installed to minimise contagion by the city's negative aspects, the perennial presence of cats in this space appears to be a mildly annoying breach. However, this annoyance reveals something particular about the spatiality of the void deck. The situation of cats loitering in the void deck—cats whose owners cannot be identified—exemplifies the ambiguous private-public boundaries that occupants regard and behave within on the void deck. The void deck's completely porous and open edges are contradictorily matched by its exact mapping of the residential units' structural grid: one gesturing to unregulated access; the other a physical reminder of every unit's fiercely guarded privacy. It is a space that feels familiar and alienating at the same time. This spatial ambiguity gives anonymity to the stealthy cat owners, who are also assuaged that their cats are roaming not far from home.

At night, cats congregate in numbers at the edges of the void deck, meowing until their feeder arrives with their food. On reaching maturity at five months, if not sterilised, a cat is liable to mate and produce offspring. But, perhaps more alarmingly, the cat 'has sex very loudly and uses its sexuality "irresponsibly", reproducing out of control'.⁶⁹ Often, these comings-and-goings happen within direct view of, or at, the void deck. The street cat produces an affective space of smells and sounds, which, like the animal, cannot be properly contained within or covered up, particularly in the open configuration of the void deck. As a space that is contig-

uous with the exterior environment surrounding the block, the void deck attracts because it is unrestricted yet provides shelter and also, in the cats' case, food.

Yet, not surprisingly, the cat appeals to those sympathetic to its 'streetwise and sensuous liberty'.⁷⁰ The free-ranging cat colony in the void deck is inevitably linked to the presence of a volunteer feeder who comes nightly to feed the cats. Drawing from conversations and her own relationship with the Singaporean feline network, the artist, critic and street-cat enthusiast Lucy Davis argues that there is an obvious gender bias pervading volunteer cat-feeders. Many of these 'nocturnal cat-feeders' are women who are usually 'single, divorced, gay, childless, or with children moved away',⁷¹ thus departing from the normative mother/wife profile indicated for public housing tenancy. These 'cat-women' are not necessarily residents of the same block. Some drive to the cat-feeding spot nightly with a bag of cat food in their car boot. Others come from neighbouring blocks. There are also cats belonging to residents who similarly roam the corridors and void decks. Although there is a high degree of tolerance for street cats congregating at the edges of the housing block for their nightly feed, there are invariably complaints regarding threats to hygiene. There have also been several recurrent cases of cats thrown from a height and subsequently found dead at the fringes of the void deck which have also caused much distress.⁷² These occurrences may be attributed to the ban on cats in flats and animal abusers taking advantage of this rule.

The cat (alive or dead) at the void deck is a situation that evokes sympathy, affection, love, disgust, loathing or anguish. These different affects correlate to equally different perceptions of the void deck as public, collective, private or domestic space, as well as what should or should not happen there, and who has rights to such an open and undefined space. The cat's affective and embodied environment overlays and disrupts the void deck's anonymity. The presence of the cats causes residents to notice, and, for some, to worry about the limits of their property.

The cat's body, not unlike other bodies prohibited in the void deck—gamblers, smokers and lovers—upsets the order and propriety of this open space. It provokes petty offences by unlikely groups of people: the nocturnal cat-women who provide food, the young family with a sterilised but unsanctioned pet cat, the eccentric woman who harbours stray cats in her flat. It sometimes also incites tragic and abusive acts of violence such as the spate of cats found dead on the apron of the void deck, seemingly thrown from the upper floor. Through the cat situation, the void deck might be seen as a corrupting site, but at the same time, the void deck also operates like a public space in its fullest sense: exposed to risk, chance, accident and event. The cat situation returns something primal, affective and visceral to the open space of the void deck.

Conclusion

I have used the two situations of cats and hoarding to argue for a different kind of perception and discourse—one that is affective rather than objective

—to reimagine and discuss the public spaces of the public housing block. I suggested that public housing's normative architectural discourse has sought to confine the potentialities of these two spaces when in fact their formal geometries, locational circumstances and proximities to the domestic units raise other kinds of possibilities and agencies. The paper reappraised the architectural histories of the void deck and the corridor in order to reveal slip-pages in the ways these two spaces have operated as compared to how they have been planned and discussed. It concluded with a more detailed examination of the two domestic situations, specifically in terms of their spatial relationships with the void deck and the corridor.

Ultimately, consideration of these marginalised yet critical domestic situations does not purport to give agency or make claims for planned resistance on the part of its subjects. Instead the aim of this paper is to use an affective situation to reimagine the shape of discourse on public space in public housing. In time, such discourse may perhaps influence the rethinking of public space's roles and usages in public housing's ongoing renewal programmes. The paper has attempted to shift the architectural discourse of such spaces from that of overwhelmingly one-sided state-controlled narratives and evidence to encompass more agents and protagonists, more complexities and situations, all of which are entangled within and with domesticity's excess. Through the void deck and the common corridor it suggests that public housing's public spaces can, despite strict building and social regulations, remain fluid and myriad in their spontaneous constituencies and constructions.

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