

THREE FLATS

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The best stake we can give to Singaporeans is a house or a flat, a home. It is the single biggest asset for most people, and its value reflects the fundamentals of the economy.¹

The everyday is platitude... but this banality is also what is most important. It brings us back to existence at its very spontaneity and as it is lived... it escapes very speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.²

When Singapore achieved self-governance in 1959, it was burdened with a high unemployment rate, a burgeoning population, devastating urban squalor and poverty. Its government implemented a developmental city-state in which “pragmatism” was “historically and materially imposed... by the domestic economic condition and the geopolitical situation of the 1960s”.³ Indeed, the nation state’s reactive stance to a perceived “atmosphere of psychosis”⁴ is key to its phenomenally successful economic performance on the world stage. This hyper-reactivity towards possible chaos goes some way in explaining how and why Singapore’s own brand of public housing distinguishes itself from the conventional model, which often manifests in other places as a marginalised and stigmatised state provision.

Public housing in Singapore is spearheaded by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which was set up in 1960. Within the first five years of self-governance, 50,000 flats were built, and within a decade of HDB’s inception, the backbone of housing shortage was broken. HDB began with the provision of basic rental units for the poor, and introduced a home ownership scheme in 1964. To ease the supply of land needed for mass housing, the colonial Land Acquisition Act was amended in 1966. The amendment allowed the government to acquire any land necessary in the interest of national development at a rate of compensation determined by the state, a clause arguably in conflict with open-market regulations.

Currently, over 83% of Singapore’s 5.2 million population live in public flats, of whom approximately 70% are owner-occupiers. In 2009, the World Bank held up Singapore as “a model of development and ‘effective urbanisation’, turning its rural slums into ‘one of the cleanest and most welcoming cities in the world’ in just 40 years.”⁵

The motivation to house the poor was the urgency to alleviate the appalling social conditions in the 1960s, and also because the state believed that eventual mass property ownership would encourage personal stakeholderism. This change would, in turn, fuel individual commitment to raising the nation’s social and economic standards.⁶ In effect, public housing is a singularly Singaporean dream project, and the nation’s ultimate success story.

Thus, it is not unusual that the occupational profile of public housing is consistent with the nation’s sociological and ideological mandates. HDB home ownership grants, quotas and policies outwardly profess stances of pro-family, pro-marriage, filial piety and racial harmony. If public housing is an effective social condenser, it is also here, an efficient mechanism for social engineering:

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.⁷

In the overall game plan, the housing dream embeds a sense of social consciousness and spatial justice. But it is equally exclusionary of social categories that transgress what is “acceptable”. “Aberrant” households comprising singles, children born out of wedlock, same-sex partnership, or even two siblings living together, are still discouraged by stringent sale and rental conditions, and deprivation of regular housing grants.

Three Flats is a film about HDB living, or the aspiration towards

making a home.⁸ It is about its interiors, about home, homemaking, finding roots, seen through the lives of three households presided over by three women who dwell alone. In contrast to the heroic modernist facades that are often at the forefront of public housing in Singapore, the film depicts these flats as a set of interiorised circumstances; that is to say, it is about spaces that are shaped by the quotidian, the ordinary and the mundane. The nondescript stove, the lovingly tended or conversely neglected potted plant, the crystal jars which make a once-a-year festive appearance, the empty dining table, the no-longer-available sewing machine, the cluttered wardrobe, the unwieldy collection of books, sentimental toys and photographs—are given as much weight as the spaces that hold them.

The camera is used as a critical alternative to the architectural drawing, which has been the primary vehicle through which the spaces of public housing have been represented. The camera becomes a means of seeing, and deciphering, space. This is done through observational cinema, which favours duration and repetition—the camera suggests a sort of objectivity, the architectural drawing proposes an authorial stance.⁹ In effect, the result privileges neither objectivity nor subjectivity per se; as the occupant who is at first stilted when confronted by the camera, perhaps learns to “perform” for it, and then gradually forgets its existence as the days and months pass.

There is no narrative in *Three Flats*. The cuts are woven together only by shared circumstances determined by the similarities and differences across the three domestic spaces, their accoutrements and events. Washing, sweeping, vacuuming, hanging up laundry, cooking, eating, sleeping, decorating, watching television and entertaining are cast as events where “nothing happens” but also where “dramatic

content” naturally occurs when slippages and gaps show up during banal routines.¹⁰

This alternative vision is “subjective” in the way that it demands the audience’s retentive “memory” of these households, their repetitive or individual details and incessantly tedious routines. It relies on both attention and inattention, such that this “memory” is almost always evoked by the person who is looking—the “reading” of the film inevitably draws upon the spectator’s personal grasp of scenes, objects, events and details common to his/her everyday domestic existence, *and* intersecting with the images seen in the three flats.

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”.¹¹ For Henri 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.”¹² 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 the “true” nature of these spaces is, 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 are both generic as well as unique. The disclosure of these spaces as a kind of generalised epistemology is necessarily partial. It exposes the impossibility of “knowing” the space of home as a

complete concrete materiality. The film emphasises the significance of “images between images” as the camera moves between the three flats, and between what we see and what we are conditioned to see.

Cinema represents domestic space in its truest materiality; that is to say, it encompasses domesticity’s (deadly) duration and repetition—a quality which gives extreme weight to this space: “... the machine... *sees* things, and *not their concept*”.¹³ This characteristic shifts the production of space from one of authority (by HDB, the architect, the filmmaker)

to that of the occupant. It also attempts to address what Ivone Margulies identifies as the key to deciphering home—an understanding of the quotidian as fragmented “material reality” (as opposed to the heroic wholeness frequently represented of Singapore’s public housing) as well as the “impossibility to fully account for it, to represent it”.¹⁴

Hence, *Three Flats* is posed as a question to its authors as well as its audience: How to understand, and how to piece together, visualise or represent, what is necessarily a complex and becoming-space of home?

Notes

1. Comment made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in “Housing Schemes to Help Young Couples”, *The Straits Times*, August 27, 1995.
2. Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech”, *Yale French Studies*, no. 73 (1987): 13. Cited by Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 21.
3. Beng Huat Chua, “Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore”, in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiang and Tan Em Ser (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 311. For discussions on Singapore as a developmental state, see Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), 6–12.
4. Phillippe Regnier, *Singapore: City-State in Southeast Asia* (London: Hurst and Company, 1991), 230. Cited in Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 10.
5. Ministry of Communications and Information, “Our History: Development”, <http://app.www.sg/who/40/Development.aspx> (accessed December 20, 2012).
6. Chua, “Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful”, 315.
7. Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 6.
8. The film is a research collaboration with Singapore filmmakers Looi Wan Ping and Tan Bee Thiam from *13 Little Pictures*, an independent film collective.
9. See Colin Young, “Observational Cinema”, in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1975), 65–79.
10. Margulies, *Nothing Happens*.
11. Cesare Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema”, in *Film: A Montage of Theories*, ed. Richard Dyer MacCann (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966), 220. Cited by Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 37.
12. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 32. Cited by Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 25.
13. Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema”, 220. Original emphasis.
14. Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 26.