



# *domesticity*

Melaka in Flux



## Introduction

More politicized than the term 'home', domesticity involves gender, sexuality, labour, class, ethnicity and taste. It concerns specific expectations of tradition, continuity and privacy. It connotes modes of production – biological, material, psychological, social, or national. Domesticity draws upon the performative aspect of bodies in space – occupants, tenants, parents, grandparents, children, maids, architects, designers, builders – and delineates how these individuals visualize, negotiate and realize ambitions for comfort, security, privacy and independence provided through the agency of architecture, or the built environment.

Domesticity is also constituted through an amazing array of material objects ranging from soft furnishings, to practical items of everyday use, technological apparati such as refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, to useless knick knacks, souvenirs and gifts accumulated during family holidays, and sentimental possessions connoting ideas of hearth and home. In effect, domestic practices create and maintain the idealized notion of home.

Through found and constructed objects, images, as well as film and audio recordings, this exhibition explores the manifestation and conservation of domesticity in relation to ideas of nationhood, community, tourism and migration. The inquiry is set in the historic city quarter of Melaka. Ultimately, the observations presented at NUS Baba House reflect the relationships between the individual house and family space to the wider contexts of neighbourhood, city and nation.



## Community

A walk down Melaka's streets is a striking experience for an outsider – the spaces within which communities create homes and preserve their unique sense of domesticity on an everyday basis are within amazingly close proximity to one another. Chinese associations hold dance classes for members within range of placid mosques; the Portuguese settlement borders an area primarily of Chinese ethnicity, and Buddhist community centres share corners with Hindu temples.

However, this proximity does not necessarily guarantee more than mere tolerance. As communities actively strive to preserve their sense of home and a feeling of camaraderie in Melaka, they must also interact daily with other groups who receive differential treatment. Does this have an impact on how communities perceive one another?

We investigated four main spaces – Buddhist temples, the Portuguese settlement, mosques, and Chinese associations – to find out how contemporary communities co-exist in Melaka. In the process, we encountered a surface of tolerance, with underlying feelings of tension between communities who refer to each other as neighbours.



## Nationhood



Domesticity in relation to nationhood is not about the individual home but about a collective sense of one's hometown. We are interested in the Melakan residents' idea of 'nation', and their feelings towards this vibrant city vis-à-vis this concept.

We identified three key sources that contribute to the construction of nationhood: the official, top-down narrative propounded by the government; folklore, such as stories of Malay warriors, and finally, the voices of the people and their sentiments toward their hometown and nation.

Our findings are reflected in the juxtaposition of artefacts, photos and videos that tell multifarious stories of home, hometown and nation. Through this, we hope to showcase the complexities and intricacies involved in nation-building and how these affect the concept of nationhood.

## Migration

Melaka is a city which possesses a rich history of migration. Today, its demographics reflect a composite history of receiving migrants from the world over. This was a migrant city, and it continues to be so. Consequently, the dynamic changes have repercussions on the city's domestic spaces.

Melaka has been home to diverse ethnic and racial groups. In the course of our investigations, we focused upon three main groups of people: the local craftsman, foreign artists and foreign workers. We ventured into the local community in search of their stories, and discovered why people have come to call Melaka home in the recent past. Through these interviews, we also uncovered reasons why people leave, and when they do, how they take a part of the city with them.

With modern Melaka as the backdrop for our exhibition, we attempt to paint a picture of migratory flows and its impact on the domestic landscape.



## Tourism



Tourism in Melaka exemplifies the blurring of public and private spheres where the domestic is made public for consumption. This relationship is key toward understanding domesticity in a dynamic, cosmopolitan environment.

A metaphor that can clearly be extended to tourism in Melaka is *packaging*. Catering to the visitor's vantage point, tangible heritage is placed within gleaming wrappings to convey a sense of commodification. Further, heritage is preserved to 'package' the city as a whole, and this in itself becomes problematic. With the special emphasis placed upon Melaka by UNESCO, tourism has increased manifold, and we attempt to examine the multitude of layers beneath its glossy surface.

During our field work, we encountered voices from the street as well as architectural exemplars that recount the deep impact of tourism upon daily life. A number of examples conveyed through the exhibition space interrogate complexities borne as a result of tourism, and chart the inevitable interaction between domestic space and the world at large.

## Group Members

*Community:* Dominik Hoehn, Univ. of Cambridge  
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Katie Steval, Univ. of Cambridge  
Liam Yuexin Jolene, NUS  
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Tan Jeng Kae, Todai

*Tourism:* Chen Ee Zhen, NUS  
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Ria Sen, DU  
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Shoko Ogata, Todai

*Teaching Staff:* A/P Dr Johannes Widodo  
Dr Lilian Chee  
Ms Foo Su Ling  
Mr Ian Tan



# Messages

As a site of investigation, Melaka offers encounters into the interconnected concerns of place and identity; each informed by the materiality of history, politics, and ethnicity as they become expressed through contemporary economic and social negotiations. Lodged within competing ideals and the capitalistic enterprise, this problematic broadly termed as heritage is characterized by its performative gestures – formal and informal organization and articulation of spaces, peoples and their activities and products – informed by a range of agency and predicaments. Weaned on diverse academic disciplines, IARU students participating in this programme will find Melaka a productive site in which their individual specializations may collectively be mobilized through observations, selection of objects, and joint presentations.

As part of our ongoing collaborations into module and student based exhibitions, the NUS Museum continues to support the Department of Architecture in the development and curating of exhibitions. We thank Dr Wong Yunn Chii, Head of Department of Architecture for this partnership, Dr Johannes Widodo, Dr Lilian Chee and Mr Ian Tan, working alongside NUS Museum curator Foo Su Ling. We congratulate the participating IARU students and hope that this project – beyond its academic aims – has nurtured lasting friendships and ties.

Ahmad Mashadi  
Head, NUS Museum

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## Co-organisers

NUS Museum  
NUS Department of Architecture

## Acknowledgements

International Alliance of Research Universities

Our Department of Architecture is honored to be given this opportunity to host one of IARU Global Summer (GSP) courses with the NUS Museum.

This especially because the course is structured around the Department's two town-house units at 54-56 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock in Melaka and NUS Museum's Baba House at Neil Road in Singapore. These are two unique learning resources generously donated to NUS, several years ago, by our benefactor, Ms Agnes Tan, in commemoration of her illustrious father, Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

The two artifices, separated by distance nonetheless are nestled in a web of shared colonial and Straits Chinese histories. At a macro-level, they provide the opportunity to examine this proposition of a Southeast Asian Cosmopolitan Urbanism. At a finer level, the issue of "domesticity," considered historically and contemporaneously.

A week of intense looking and re-looking, writing and re-writing has challenged our IARU participants to imagine a variety of frames to position what they have "found" and "constructed". Domesticity, its absence or excess, can never be seen in isolation; and always, in-relation-to something else.

They have drawn out all sorts of strands of connections, causalities, tangentialities, inter-subjectivities; between people and objects, between desires and needs, between the pragmatic and the idealized. We see them in these topics that they have identified: domesticity and migration, domesticity and tourism, domesticity and community, domesticity and nationhood. We thank all the participants for raising our awareness to these charged couplets. They will form the grounds for future explorations, and adding to our knowledge of the the already rich palette of Melakan life today.

I would also like to register my gratitude to the Office of International Relations, to NUS Museum and my two colleagues, A/P Dr Johannes Widodo and Dr Lilian Chee for championing this course. Through their guidance and support, they have spurred our IARU-GSP participants towards new layers of insight, into what constitutes the cosmopolitanism of Melaka.

Assoc. Prof. (Dr) Wong Yunn Chii  
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# NUS Baba House

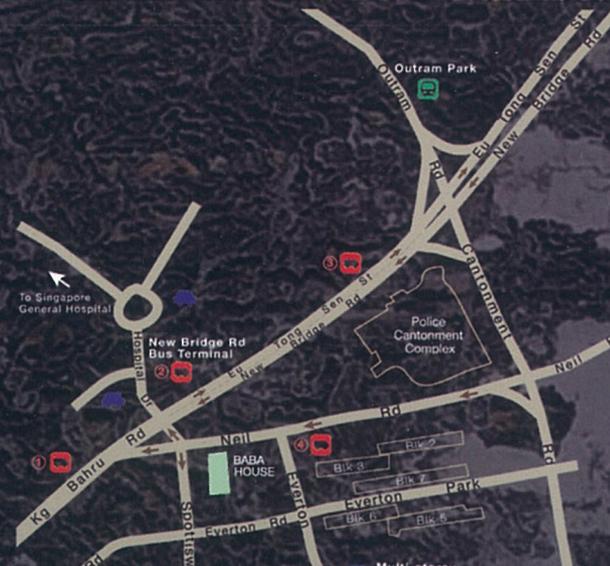
A gift from Ms Agnes Tan to the National University of Singapore, the NUS Baba House was officially opened in September 2008. Once the ancestral home of a Straits Chinese family, it is now conceived as a heritage house which facilitates appreciation, reflection and research into the Straits Chinese history and culture. This is articulated primarily through the reconstruction of a domestic space characterised by the architectural conservation of the shophouse, and restoration of interiors including furnishing, household materials and decorative features. Research, conservation and restoration were undertaken in partnership with NUS Department of Architecture and Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The first and second floors of the NUS Baba House reference the community's material culture during the first half of the 20th century. The third floor hosts temporary exhibitions, encouraging academic researchers and art practitioners to explore fresh perspectives into an evolving discourse on the Straits Chinese, and to develop insights into cultural encounters, hybridity and their contemporary implications. NUS Baba House is also a unique resource for the study of architectural traditions, conservation efforts and urban developments in Singapore.



NUS Baba House  
(managed by NUS Museum, an institution of NUS Centre For the Arts)  
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Visits to the exhibition only (3rd floor) are free and By Appointment.  
Visits to the 1st and 2nd floors of NUS Baba House are By Appointment Only. Visitors are required to sign up in advance for a heritage tour.



Parking available

Bus services

61, 124, 143, 147, 166, 167, 196, 197, 961