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Abstract

This paper takes as its empirical focus the advice on interior design and decoration that Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) distributed to residents as part of its programme of universal housing provision. Through a series of regular articles appearing in the HDB publication *Our Home* (1972-1989), readers were presented with stories that showed how selected HDB residents decorated their newly acquired highrise flats. This unique aspect of the HDB's otherwise well-documented housing programme has, thus far, remained unexamined. The paper details the relationship between this design advice and three inter-related features of the Singaporean public housing programme: a commitment to modernist design principles, a self-conscious pragmatism, and the incorporation of a limited market logic ('home ownership'). This paper demonstrates that the Housing Development Board's vision of the benefit of its highrise housing programme was, from the outset, complexly entangled with cultivating individual investments in the home by way of interior design and decoration practices. It contributes not only to the specific story of Singaporean housing, but also to wider scholarship on modernism, the everyday practices of interior design, and housing consumption.

Interior design, housing consumption, modernism, Singapore

Introduction

From its beginnings in 1960, Singapore's Housing Development Board (hereafter HDB), has been the main provider of housing for Singaporeans, nowadays accommodating well over 85% of the population in 'owned' (long-term leasehold) flats. Constrained by land shortages, committed to the pragmatics of efficient delivery, and no doubt influenced by global trends in mass housing provision, it enthusiastically adopted the modernist highrise as the architectural type for its post-independence programme of universal housing provision. The HDB has routinely reflected with pride on the part it, and its housing programme, has played in the making of modern Singapore. For example, the HDB's main office, dubbed 'The Hub', has always boasted a small museum space showcasing the institution's achievements. In its current headquarters the museum is part of an extensive display

space called 'The Gallery' which uses a series of 'before and after' interior recreations to tell the story of the HDB's role in providing 'homes for the people'. Visitors are led past 'slum', 'squatter' and 'kampung' interiors, on to the modern interiors of the 1960s highrises, then finally encounter contemporary innovations like the entirely pre-fabricated 'plug-on' bathroom. The curatorial sensibility of this display lays somewhere between that of the museum diorama and the 'show home'. Indeed, in the current HDB main office, visitors can seamlessly move from the interior recreations of the museum space to view a series of full-scale, fully decorated interior layouts of HDB flats currently on offer to prospective buyers.¹ Both the HDB museum-style 'Gallery' and associated 'home show' space hint at the special role the interior and interior decoration has played in the housing provision story of Singapore.

In this paper we argue that the home interior lay at the heart of a finely calibrated relationship in which state-based processes of collective consumption combined with emergent patterns of individual consumption in the cultivation of a modern, post-independence Singaporean nation and citizenry. In order to elucidate the special place of the domestic interior in Singapore's post-independence modernisation we focus upon practices of interior styling associated with the phases of the HDB's programme of universal housing provision that spanned the Third to the Sixth Building Programmes (the 1970s and 80s). Our key interest is in previously undocumented advice given on home decoration by way of a series of articles appearing in the HDB-produced magazine, *Our Home*, which was distributed free to all HDB tenants between 1972 and 1989. Through this advice it is possible to glimpse how practices of collective and individual consumption come together through the HDB's programme of housing provision.² And through these articles it is also possible to see past the uniform exteriors of these modernist highrises to glimpse the variable expressions of interior styling. In these emergent Singaporean interiors amateur interpretations of interior style mixed with idealised notions of modern decor, freedoms of expression jostled with state regulatory frameworks, and efforts to encourage domestic creativity rubbed against the economic benefits and costs of expanding home-related consumption.

We appreciate that our focus on a sub-set of official housing discourse in Singapore runs counter to the ethnographic emphasis currently shaping, among other

things, studies of the home (see as examples Miller 1988, 2001a, Madigan and Munro 1996, Attfield 1999, Buchli 1999, Clarke 2001, Llewellyn 2004, Sparke 2004, Tolia-Kelly 2004). This is not based on a judgement about the relative merits of studies of discourse versus studies of practice (see Lorimer 2005). Rather, it is borne out of both practical and theoretical concerns. From a practical point of view, the textual archive is essential to historical work on the interior, for decorative schemes (along with residents) change frequently such that they are relatively ephemeral artifacts, our retrospective knowledge of which depends, in large part, upon existing records (Sparke 2004). For example, accessing what interiors might have been like in post-independence Singapore is greatly assisted by the interior décor articles appearing in *Our Home*, for they feature actual interiors created by HDB residents. As such, this magazine offers a unique record not only of how long-gone Singaporean interiors looked, but also, through its reportage of resident's explanations of their choices, an insight into how residents themselves engaged with the practices of interior decoration. Admittedly, the homes and residents featured in *Our Home* would have conformed to official ideals for HDB interiors, such that these residents and their flats could operate illustratively. But while this filter creates a limit in terms of these articles offering a window onto the full range of home-making practices of the time, it also brings clearly into view the recursive relationship between the 'ideal' (discursive) home and the 'real' (practiced) home (see Chapman and Hockey 1999, Sparke 2004, van Caudenberg and Heynen 2004). This leads us to the theoretical value of attending to a representational field such as that contained in *Our Home*. Muthesius (2005) has shown that the emergence in the nineteenth century of the private domestic interior as a discrete site and conceptual category was, from the very outset, accompanied by a range of representational media such as the interior design magazine and the shop window, 'stage set' display. As such, understanding 'the actual design and consumption of interiors' is always in conversation with 'the representation of design in mass-mediated form' (Aynsley and Berry 2005, 1). Following Miller (2001a), we wish to press this relational association further, by showing how the house itself is part of a process of mediation whereby a household encounters wider society, including ideas about how a home interior should look, how one can be modern or, even, how one can be Singaporean (see also Clarke 2001, 25). As we shall show, the look of the emergent Singaporean interior was not about styles that belonged to some pre-existent, determining sphere, like that of 'modernist design', nor simply to structures external or prior to the act of home-making, like the prescriptions of a state-based housing programme. Nor did it reside solely in the

‘expressive’ home-decorating efforts of residents, even when done as do-it-yourself (Miller 2001a, 10). Singaporean interiors, like home interiors generally, emerged out of a complex and often contradictory relationship between decorative and consumption practices and ideals, orders and grammars that resided both in the site of the home and elsewhere — on design drawing tables, in bureaucracies, in magazines, in commercial premises, in a resident’s imaginative and practical world, in the very colour of paint, texture of walls, and pieces of furniture, be they newly acquired or handed down (Sorensen 2002, 24). For example, in relation to ‘the proliferation of home decoration and the popularization of design’ in Britain, Clarke (2001, 26) acknowledges that the house form and normative ideas of style ‘cast a shadow’ over individual interior decoration decisions and efforts. But, as alternate to this ‘shadow’, she does not simply propose that analysis turn to an ‘expressive’ counter-styling held surely and solely in the hands of the resident. Rather, Clarke (42) reveals how the relationship between ‘ideal’ and ‘actual’ worlds of home decorating is embedded in a complex process of mediation whereby a resident’s ‘internalization’ of ‘ideal home’ design prescriptions entangle with their own ‘projection’ of ‘ideal home’ design fantasies and aspirations.

Where is the modern interior?

The special role played by the HDB domestic interior in the modernization of post-independence Singapore echoes the central place the interior held in early theorisations of modernity more generally. For example, Walter Benjamin saw the ornamented nineteenth-century domestic interior as an emblematic space of modernity, against which the ideals and aesthetics of modernism formed. In what follows we take as a starting point Benjamin’s reflections on the relationship between the domestic interior, modernity and modernism. In doing so we do not wish to imply that a modernity (including architectural modernism) that originated in Europe was simply applied to, or poorly imitated in, Singapore. To do so would be to entrap Singaporean modernisation and modernism within a developmentalist model (Robinson 2006). But we do not wish to dislodge modernism entirely from the specificities of its production such that its ‘international’ aspirations out rank the situated nature of its making (and re-making). The stylistic and ideological shape of the modernism that Singapore invested in so enthusiastically in its housing

programme was, in the first instance, generated in Europe. The post-independence Singaporean interior, although made and lived within the context of quite localised agendas and aspirations and, as we shall see, re-shaping modernism quite dramatically, was at the same time inevitably in conversation with this other history and geography.

The nineteenth-century domestic interior was inextricably linked to the expansion and intensification of urban experience under industrialization. The industrial city not only delivered new freedoms but also previously unknown levels of fragmentation and stimulation (Simmel (1950 (1903)). In this context 'living space became distinguished from the space of work' as never before (Benjamin 1973, 167). The home offered a discrete and private space, which served as a refuge from the busy-ness outside (Perrot, Ariès and Duby, 1990). And the consumption of domestic goods offered new opportunities for individual expression and identification (Benjamin 1999, 227). The home, and the commodities within it, became part of a contradictory arrangement of defensive display. On the one hand, furnishings, finishings and ornaments were increasingly asked to carry meaning as objects of self expression. On the other, the display style was one in which domestic objects were secreted away through the use of 'coverlets and cases', 'étuis, dust covers and sheaths', 'antimacassars...and containers' (Benjamin 1999, 9 and 227). This 'fortified' interior depended upon a nested spatiality wherein one space – be it a room, a cabinet, a receptacle, a pouch or pocket – always seemed to contain another, in a refining and miniaturising sequence. Bourgeois homemakers fabricated scenes, moods and atmospheres of the 'far away and the long ago' such that the living room itself was 'a box in the theatre of the world' (Benjamin 1999, 8-9). Here the 'self-satisfied burgher' could create interior atmospheres and through them 'know something of the feeling that the next room might have witnessed the coronation of Charlemagne... the assassination of Henri VI, the signing of the Treaty of Verdun ... the wedding of Otto and Theophano' (Benjamin 1999, 216).

In this domestic scene the bourgeois urban subject and the consumer object were entangled in an ever more intricate co-production of selfhood. That intimacy left its trace in the very fabric of the home, often enough velour or plush fabrics, which readily 'preserve[d] the imprint of all contact' (Benjamin 1999, 9). Such surfaces acted as clues to, and cues for, the pattern of daily life. In Benjamin's view, the nineteenth century dwelling operated like a shell or a compass case in which shelter

and the occupant were so ‘moulded’ to one another that they were mutually defining (Benjamin 1999, 220). Benjamin was critical of this fit, which he thought produced a ‘nihilistic cosiness’, a dream-like ‘satanic calm’ from which one might never stir (Benjamin 1999, 216, see also van Herck 2005). Although these interior worlds operated quite literally as escapes and retreats from the capitalist competition animating the industrial city, their production depended upon new practices of consumption. As Holland (1988, 412) suggests, the home became the ‘altar’ of a new private religion of industrial capitalism, ‘and its idol... [was] the fetish called “Commodity”’ (Holland 1988, 412).

Benjamin’s critique of this commodified and phantasmagorical mode of dwelling, drew upon modernist models of living, as articulated in Le Corbusier’s *Urbanisme* (1925) [translated as *The city of tomorrow and its planning*]. The transparency, airiness and openness of Le Corbusier’s vision ‘put an end to dwelling in the old sense’ (Benjamin 1999, 221). Modern architecture had little interest in sustaining the interior as a personal retreat serving individual expression. The smoothness of materials used in modern architecture and the flatness of its forms was inimical to the traces of its inhabitants and sought to hide nothing. ‘Glass’, as Benjamin notes, ‘is such a hard and flat material that nothing settles on it It is above all the enemy of secrets. It is the enemy of possessions’ (Benjamin cited in Reed, 1996, 10). Ornament too was a specific bother for the modern style. Essays like ‘Ornament and Crime’ (Loos 1908) laid the grounds for subsequent modernist thinkers to designate ornament not only as undesirable on the basis of aesthetics but also because associated with undesirable, because ‘primitive’ or ‘feudal’, social orders. As Jules Lubbock (1995, 301) has noted, the advocates of the modern style ‘claimed that good modern design and civilisation were one and the same’.

This apparent indifference to the traces of domestic life is perhaps most compellingly represented by the dogma of whiteness that, as Young (2004, 13) notes, has become a ‘given’ of modernism’s history. Architectural historian Mark Wigley (1995) has shown that by the late 1920s the identity of modern architecture came to be ‘located in its white surfaces’, so much so that ‘[t]he idea that modern architecture is white’ is accepted internationally (xiv). For Le Corbusier, and other modernists, white was not simply a colour scheme, it was an embodiment of the ethical, political

and moral substance of modernism. This is most clearly stated in Le Corbusier's 1925 book *L'art decorative d'aujourd'hui*, in which he examines the objects of contemporary everyday life and condemns those that have ornate decoration. He reads such decoration as a 'mask' that alienates the object from its user, creating a nostalgia that disguises its true origin and function. In his repudiation of the visual confusion and alienation that he believed ornamental surfaces promoted, Le Corbusier advocated the whitewashing of architecture, both inside and out. The white surface for Le Corbusier (1987 (1925), 190) functioned like 'an x-ray of beauty' and 'eye of truth' disclosing new aesthetic potentials of unadorned, mass-produced, functional objects of modern metropolitan life.

Modernism's journey from the drawing boards and manuscripts of designers to the interiors of twentieth-century homemakers was by way of a range of representational media each elaborating those associated with the emergent nineteenth-century domestic interior. The reproduction 'ideal home' or 'show home' was significant in this regard, and played an important part in disseminating modernism's radically new design and living principles (Chapman and Hockey 1999, Chapman 1999, Clarke 2001, and specifically in relation to Singapore Baydar Nalbantoglu 1997). In Britain, for example, the model home and the home show gained new prominence not only through massively popular events like the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibitions, begun in 1908, but also the plethora of other more minor home shows and design displays (Chapman 1999, Woodham 2004). In practice, modernist visions always jostled with existing practices and preferences, coming to be reshaped by distinctive national contexts and specific state and private sector agencies. Indeed, as much recent research has shown, the coherence of the modernist vision did not ensure it replaced earlier configurations of domestic space or pre-existing home styling practices. Modernism as a practised style of home making did not do away with the complex processes by which style ideals, homes and home-making subjects co-produced each other. Indeed, modernism generated new subject-forming possibilities that drew together in novel assemblages not only residents, designers, magazines, show homes, and new building technologies, but also existing housing fabric, inherited objects, persistent nostalgias and existing grammars for domestic living. It is not our intention to recount in detail the growing research that has accounted for how modernist domestic architectures have been lived (see as

examples Boudon 1979, Miller 1988, 2001b, Attfield 1989, 1999, Gullestad 1992, Chua 1996, Buchli 1999, Llewellyn 2004). However, we would like to note some distinctive analytical threads in relation to the ways in which the lived modernist domestic interior has been explained. In the first instance, there is a tendency to always position modernism, at least in the first instance, as belonging to visions and structures external to those of the householder themselves. For example, in the work of Gullestad (1992, 77) ideas of modernism belong in the hands of planning and architectural professionals who are responsible for what she refers to as ‘the almost mute’ outsides of houses. Domestic modernism is further caricatured as inserting itself into the daily lives of householders either by stealth, through the constraints imposed by modernist built fabric, or by force, in the case of state-provided modernism. For example, Buchli’s (1999) study of architectural modernism in the Soviet shows how the ‘domestic front’ became a ‘locus of battle’ against petit bourgeois values, such that ‘homemaking’ and ‘taste’ became legitimate concerns for the state (41), justifying interventions in everything from levels of light to the necessity for ‘de-artificialisation’ (140-149). Such interpretations tend to externalise the origins of the idealised domestic modern such that the reality of a lived modern must always be a matter of ‘internal’ reaction: ‘accommodation’, ‘interpretation’, ‘adaptation’, ‘adjustment’ ‘appropriation’, ‘resistance’. As stated in our opening sections, we would wish to assume a more complicated relationality between the agents that make the modern interior, such that the home is more properly understood as ‘both the source and the setting of mobility and change’ (Miller 2001a, 4), a multi-media event that entangles design ideals, the materiality of things, rules and regulations, with individual and collective effort.

Turning houses into homes in post-independence Singapore

Much has been written about the unique public housing provision programme of post-independence Singapore and in what follows we confine our attention to those aspects of the existing scholarship that bear upon the place of the interior and the role of interior styling. The structure and style of housing provision in Singapore animated the interior of flats in a very specific way, such that home-making became not simply something that residents did within the freedom of their own home, but a matter of state concern and effort. The HDB began its task of ‘housing a nation’ as a fledgling

post-independence bureaucracy, having assumed the responsibility of housing provision from the colonial Singapore Improvement Trust. The post-independence Singaporean state invested heavily in highrise modernist housing but did so for reasons that went far beyond a social welfare commitment to provide ‘decent shelter’ (Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 303). Housing provision was a key mechanism in the making of modern Singapore: politically, culturally and economically. Chua (1997) has observed that the commitment to universal provision meant that housing came to operate as a ‘covenant’ between people and government, with ‘continually upgraded’ housing offered in exchange for political support for the People’s Action Party (PAP). PAP, he argues, secured its long-term political legitimacy by way of its commitment to ‘universal’ housing provision, giving Singapore a unique political stability if debated model of democracy (see also Lim 1989). Housing also provided a tool for the cultural integration of the nation. By applying specific formulas of multi-ethnic mixing in blocks and estates, the HDB provided a crucial mechanism for engineering a well-integrated, multi-ethnic Singapore (Lai 1995). And, perhaps most significantly, housing provision was an intrinsic part of the emergent ‘developmental state’: lowering costs of living, developing urban infrastructure, directing capital formation (through compulsory savings), and providing employment opportunities (Castells, Goh, Kwok 1990).

The prioritising of development was a hallmark of post-independence Singapore and combined local agendas with more worldly aspirations linked to the international economy (Kong 2000, 411). A pragmatic reasoning often justified activities undertaken in the name of development, and a specific imperative was given to development itself by the uncertainty surrounding post-independence Singapore’s chances of ‘survival’ as a viable social, economic and political entity (Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 190). During this period the state cultivated ‘a continual sense of crisis and urgency’ in relation to which it could justify exercising exceptional powers, not least of which was the decommmodification of land in Singapore which allowed compulsory acquisition for the purpose of any development deemed to be in the national interest (Perry, Kong and Yeoh 1997, 6, see also Chua 1997). Clancy (2004), for example, has noted that Singapore’s post-independence housing programme was justified explicitly by the diagnosis of a ‘housing emergency’. Landmark events, such as the 1961 fire in the ‘squatter village’ of Bukit Ho Swee, which left hundreds

homeless, were used by the state to underline both the ‘necessity’ of housing modernisation, as well as its ability to tackle the problem quickly and efficiently (Clancey 2004, 45; see also Chua 1989). But Singapore’s housing ‘emergency’ was more profoundly embedded in official adjudications that existing housing (be that kampung, shop house or squatter settlement) was inappropriate: because not modern, falling short of standards of sanitation, exhibiting overcrowding, forcing ‘inappropriate’ activities onto the street, or harbouring subversive or illegal activities (including communist activities) (see Kong and Yeoh 1994). As such, re-housing was foundationally conceived of by the state as a developmental journey: from ‘back then’ to ‘right now’, from ‘uncivilised’ to ‘civilised’, from ‘pre-modern’ to ‘modern’.

The HDB’s wholehearted embracing of highrise modernism as the architectural style for its housing programme was also justified pragmatically rather than aesthetically or ideologically (Luck 2004). As Lui Thai Ker, then Executive Officer reflected in the 25th Anniversary volume *Housing a Nation*, the commitment to the highrise was ‘not intended to show off economic and technological capabilities’, there was ‘simply no other choice’. Despite the HDB already being aware of what they termed the ‘inherent disadvantages’ (Tan et al. 1985, 56) and ‘handicaps’, and admitting the ‘belief’ held by ‘some sociologists’ that highrises contribute to a ‘sense of isolation’, practical reasoning nonetheless led inexorably upward:

The HDB has taken from the start a realistic and pragmatic stand by deciding that, in order to house every citizen decently, the residential density must be high. In order to sustain a high standard of living conditions, the dwelling units must be as large as the applicants can afford. To meet the criteria of high-density and large flats, the buildings have to be high-rise’ (Lui 1989, 8).

In *Housing a Nation* (1985) the official narrative makes clear the fine-grained effort the HDB put into over-coming problems that were already evident in the highrises of Europe and North America. This effort manifested in rules and regulations about how residents should live in their homes and communities, systems of housing allocation, as well as a range of educational programmes that cultivated specific types of behaviour and values. It is perhaps unsurprising that scholarly and populist commentators routinely describe Singapore as ‘authoritarian’ in style. Certainly, Castells, Goh and Kwok (1990, 8) see the collective consumption of housing as a key

mechanism of 'social control in the management of the economy and of the society'. But perhaps it is Wee's (2001, 987) characterisation of Singapore's mode of rule as 'disciplinary modernisation' that best approximates what was operating during the immediate post-independence years. For, as Wee observes, during this time the state sought not to be unilaterally authoritarian, but to 're-tool the subjectivities of its citizenry in the name of a modernist...utopianism' (Wee 2001, 987 and 999).

The practical complexity of Singapore's development style is explicitly expressed through one unique feature of Singapore's 'public' housing story, this being the Home Ownership for the People Scheme, established in 1964. The scheme augmented the commitment to universal housing provision with a vision for a 'property-owning democracy' and did so by allowing all HDB residents to opportunity to 'buy' (on long-term 99 year leaseholds) their flats (HDB *Annual Report* 1964). As Chua (1997, 3) notes, in most advanced capitalist contexts where housing provision is dominated by a private property system, public housing operates as a 'contingent response to market failures in providing affordable housing for all'. As such, it is structurally residualised and marginalised within that wider market hegemony. The Singaporean system of housing provision deviates from this structure in significant ways such that public provision proceeded in unison with what Chua (1997, 3) called the 'disciplinary constraints of the market'. The Singaporean 'home ownership' scheme was heavily subsidised by the state, both directly and indirectly. The decommodification of land for the purpose of compulsory acquisition kept land values out of the equation for determining house prices until 1987. Indeed, as the HDB enjoyed a virtual monopoly on supply of housing in Singapore, it was also able to fix tenure eligibility and prices in relation to flats according to factors of its own determining (mainly the state of the economy and levels of affordability). Initial take up of the Scheme was low, so in 1968 a new initiative was introduced that allowed residents to use a proportion of their compulsory acquired savings, held in the government's Central Provident Fund (CPF) (see Tan 1998, Ching and Tyabji 1991). HDB tenants, and others wishing to enter HDB housing, could not only pay their monthly mortgage through their CPF, but also call upon it for the initial 20% down payment. In the year following the opening of the CPF monies to aspirant home owners, the applications to buy HDB flats tripled from 2384 to 7407, while applicants to rent almost halved (Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 233). By 1970 some 63% of all

public-housing applicants applied to buy (Chua 1986, 23) and by 1979 61% of the 337, 247 units of the HDB were owner-occupied (Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 236).

This system of 'public home ownership' (Tu 1999, 100) is especially relevant to understanding the post-independence Singapore interior and the role of design in its making. Although there were economic and political aspirations associated with encouraging home ownership, this strategy also protected and enhanced existing state investment in housing. It was assumed that home ownership would encourage residents to look after their homes: 'they have an investment in it and they look after it', said the Senior Principal Architect of the HDB in the *Straits Times* in 1984 (quoted in Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 231). Furthermore, from 1971 onwards, limited opportunities were opened up for owners to sell on their homes to others eligible for public housing, and at a price agreed upon between seller and buyer. Capital gains acquired through the sale could be used to buy into a better flat or, if the vendor elected to downgrade, be realized as profit. Although selling on could only be done once (thus preventing the public stock being used for speculation), it did convert the HDB flat into an 'investment good' from the point of view of residents (Chua 1997, 24).

With the introduction of the Home Ownership Scheme new expectations emerged around the type and standard of flats provided and one of the HDB's 'single most administrative preoccupations' became maintaining the asset values of public housing flats (Chua 2003, 770). In this context there was a need to produce flats with a 'value' potential in excess of that attached to the idea of emergency 'shelter'. The supply emphasis moved away from one-room emergency flats, to larger and more varied layouts. In 1966 the Design and Research Unit was established by the HDB specifically to study and advise on ways to improve the standard of flats, not only to better meet resident's housing needs, but also to ensure their marketability. During the 1970s a variety of improved flat designs were developed including the five-room 'standard'; 'new' flats with larger rooms and improved ventilation and fixtures; and the spacious 'Model A' flats with 10-20% more floor area (Castells, Goh and Kwok 1990, 237). By 1979 the HDB was converting all one-room 'emergency' flats by knocking together units to create 3-room flats, and had introduced the first generation of 'executive' flats.

Entering the Singapore Interior

In this model of housing provision the responsibility for the finishes and look of interiors had a specific structure. Apart from selected blocks, all HDB flats were built with the expectation that residents would finish and furnish the interior of the flat themselves. And from the 1970s, when the Home Ownership Scheme was introduced, the large majority of flats had only basic 'fixtures and finishes' inserted by the HDB in order to ensure minimal standards of comfort and sanitation (sinks and toilet) and to protect the main structure from water damage (tiling in the wet areas). Indeed, as home-ownership took off there was more dissatisfaction with the basic HDB finishes. Residents routinely worked over existing finishes and fixtures or removed them. To avoid 'wasting' labour and materials the HDB switched to offering flats that were simply 'a bare carcass', a 'shell with cement rendered walls and hollow block walls without plastering' (Wong and Yeh 1985, 68). As the official HDB history *Housing a Nation* reported: 'residents ... renovate their flats according to their own tastes and budgets. It helps to keep construction costs low, reduce wastage and minimise the inherent monotony of the standardised floor plans through the resident's personal touch' (Wong and Yeh 1985, 68). From the outset, then, the state harnessed individual consumption efforts to the collective consumption of housing such that home improvements worked to subsidise state housing provision (see Baudrillard 2005 (1996), 24). Under such conditions it is hardly surprising, in fact necessary, that the interior spaces of highrises should come specifically into view for the educative and regulatory efforts of the state.

To date, the considerable scholarship on housing provision in Singapore has given limited attention to the ways in which the interiors of homes were shaped. The two notable exceptions, that of Chua Beng Huat (1987) and Castells, Goh and Kwok (1990), we have already drawn upon extensively. Theirs is important scholarship not only for what it tells us about the Singaporean housing process in general, but also the Singapore interior specifically. Each accounts for those interiors by way of quite distinct explanatory frames that are useful to dwell upon in relation to our own approach.

Chua's (1997, 1999) sustained interest in the sociology and politics of housing provision in Singapore has included some of the most detailed political and

ethnographic accounts. Having conducted a path-breaking longitudinal study of a community's movement from kampung to a highrise, his work also includes what was then rare attention to the detail of how residents lived in the newly acquired flats. For example, Chua observed how individual households were forced to restructure their 'symbolic universe' and 'cultural practices' upon making the move from more traditional dwelling types to the 'standardised' units of the modernist HDB flats. Adjustment to resettlement was, he argued, 'often hindered by restrictive regulations' imposed by the HDB. These regulations are, in turn, often determined by 'the values behind the architectural designs...embedded and inscribed in the...standardised dwellings' (Chua 1996, 6-7). Chua proceeds to give a specific example of this problem:

'For example, architectural modernism demands that the façade of a block be maintained in uniform colour for visual consistency, reducing residents' freedom to choose the colours of their dwellings. Structural elements that fix the layout of the housing unit itself cannot be tampered with, radically reducing the residents' ability to redeploy the interior spaces provided for them. The restrictions make it difficult for affected households to break away from the monotony of the standardised housing units and transform them into individual "homes". As the home is tied to the identity of a household, freedom to individualise will undoubtedly affect the satisfactory adjustments of the occupants'.

Despite these limits, Chua (1996) has documented in detail one particular type of intervention made by tenants to the standardised flats, this being the cultural 'adjustments' made by ethnically-identified occupants (Chinese, Hindu, Malay). For example, he documented the ways in which Chinese residents adjusted room layouts to accommodate altars, Hindus transformed storerooms into prayer rooms, and Malays petitioned space to ensure protocols of religious of hygiene. Although opting for the softer notion of 'adjustment', Chua's analysis of what residents did to their modernist flats has much in common with the everyday interior 'appropriations' that others have charted in relation the lived fortunes of European modernism. That said, Chua's observations imply it was a traditionalised and ethnically identified 'culture' that was the motivating force for resident's interventions in the modernist interiors of Singapore. In Chua's reading of the Singaporean interior, tradition and modernity are set in sharp relief. On the one hand, we see that resident's were not in any simply way

subjected by the modern logics of the highrise in that they ‘adapted’ it. On the other, we are presented with a very limited, ethnically determined, framework of resources by which such ‘adjustment’ took place.

The analysis of Castells, Goh and Kwok (1990), in contrast, is suggestive of a wider set of imaginative and material resources at work in the shaping of post-independence Singaporean interiors. Turning specifically to the impact of home ownership, they note that owners would spend often quite substantial additional amounts to ‘rectify and recondition’ their flats, ‘finishing their flats with marble, ceramic, or other tiles, replastering the walls, replacing the doors, upgrading the sanitary fixtures and electrical wiring...and furnishing their flats’ (265). Such investment was facilitated in part by credit arrangements available for such purposes, and the pages of *Our Home* featured from early on advertisements by Credit POSB, a state-supported financial service that offered loans of up to 90% of the cost of renovation or furnishing project. For example, one such advertisement featured an image of a woman’s hands with an interior decoration magazine open, and has the caption: “Beautiful interiors do not have to stay in magazines’ (Credit POSB advertisement, *Our Home* August 1981, 9).

Castells, Goh and Kwok, drawing on newspaper reports of the time, explain this enthusiastic investment in decoration on the poor quality of the finishes and basic fittings of HDB flats in the 1970s. What is certain is that there was an increasing mismatch between the quality and style of the interior provided and the interior aspirations of residents. As they note, ‘many spent more than what the flat cost to create not just a comfortable home but a luxurious flat’ (265). Indeed, so extensive was the investment of residents in the interiors of their flat there was concern that the cost of public housing was ‘indirectly’ being inflated by 10% to 30%. Furthermore, in the mid 1980s when a task force was established to inquire into the causes of the economic recession of 1985-6, it was the collective and individual over-investment in the housing sector that came under specific scrutiny. According to that task force, by the mid 1980s it was conservatively estimated that an average of 37% of Singaporean’s income was spent on buying a home, housing related services (such as insurance, maintenance, tax, utilities), and renovating. Not only was spending excessive, but so too was the aesthetic effect. As Castells, Goh and Kwok (1990, 323) note, because homebuyers did not need to draw from their own savings to purchase a

flat (drawing instead on CPF savings) they ‘lavishly spent their savings or even obtained loans to renovate and furnish their flats in an ostentatious manner’. So worrying was this excessive expenditure on home improvements, the task force warned that the ability of the CFP to fund old-age pensions might be impaired, sending the nation into financial crisis.

In the final part of this paper we wish to chart a supplementary analytical pathway to those followed by these existing stories of the making of the Singapore interior. In doing so we draw upon Nikolas Rose’s more general analysis of ‘interior’ realms in modernity. Extending the work of Foucault, Rose has shown how the ‘private self’, as he calls it, is subject to governing by way of a range of medical, sociological and psychological technologies (Rose 1989, 1998, Miller and Rose 1997, Rose and Osborne 1999). Rose’s work is specifically relevant to advanced liberal democracies wherein consumption plays a central role in the making of subjectivity. In such contexts, he argues, power does not simply operate to ‘dominate, deny and repress’, but works through the processes that form and enact subjectivity (1998, 151). He argues that we can no longer think of clear divisions between ‘the state’ and ‘private life’ suggesting that the relations between “the self” and power...is not a matter of lamenting the ways in which our autonomy is suppressed by the state, but of investigating the ways in which subjectivity has become an essential...resource for certain strategies...of regulation’ (152). In this sense, he exposes how in advanced liberal democracies there is a structure of ‘governing *through* the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them’ (155). As noted, Rose specifically contemplates these arguments in relation to consumption. Consumers, he argues, are constituted as ‘actors’ pursuing a certain ‘quality of life’ or ‘life-style’ by way of ‘choice in a world of goods’ (162). The commodity ‘cast back upon those who purchased it’ a certain ‘glow’ that says something of who they are or want to be. ‘[D]esign, marketing and image construction’ play a vital role in this exchange between goods and subjectivity and, most significantly, work to ensure that we are ‘governed through the choices that we ourselves will make, under the guidance of cultural and cognitive authorities, in the space of regulated freedom’ (166). In scholarship that directly extends this thinking to the sphere of public housing consumption, John Flint (2003) has argued that social housing clients in the UK are actively being cultivated as consumers of housing. Flint shows how ‘values, beliefs

and sentiments’ (what Rose would term ‘aesthetic elements’) prescribe a specific ‘art’ or ‘grammar’ of living (Flint 2003, 613; see also Rose 1991 and 1999). This in turn provides the basis for ‘arm’s length’ management of social housing populations, such that housing consumption becomes a site for the exercise of ‘ethopower’, a mechanism for ‘shaping conduct’ more broadly. It is to the shaping of this grammar from living that we now turn.

Cultivating creativity

From 1972 through to the late 1989 the HDB published *Our Home* as bi-monthly magazine that was delivered free to every HDB household in Singapore and available for purchase at a minimal cost by non-HDB readers (Table 1 and Figure 1). The inaugural issue of *Our Home* magazine begins with a clear statement of purpose:

“‘Our Home’ is about you and others in HDB housing estates. You will get to know how much other people are like you, how other residents live, their problems and how to overcome them and about their achievements ... what matters is that we all make that community something to be proud of, a healthy environment for our children.... ‘Our Home’ can help us all build a better home!’ (Editorial, *Our Home*, June 1970, 2).

Despite significant circulation numbers, there is no known study of the readership patterns for this magazine. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is likely that, as time went by, residents thought it increasingly superfluous to the way they lived in their increasingly familiar HDB-provided homes. Be that as it may, the magazine – and specifically the articles on interior design we deal with here – offers a unique window on to the fine-grained detail of living in HDB housing, and specifically the complex dialogue between HDB aspirations and those of the emerging ‘home-owning democracy’ its housing programme aimed to produce.

Year	Circulation	Year	Circulation
1973	161,000	1983	418,500
1975	200,000	1984	419,900
1978	246,000	1985	433,400
1979	280,000	1986	433,400
1980	300,000	1987	440,000
1981	325,000	1988	440,000
1982	400,000	1989	440,000

Table 1: Circulation figures for *Our Home* for years data available. Source: *Our Home*.

Among other things, this magazine offered practical advice on how to live ‘properly’ in new highrise environment, through articles with titles like ‘Making it a home sweet home’ (*Our Home*, October 1985, 40), ‘Be a good neighbour’ (*Our Home*, August 1988, 11), ‘More than just a roof’ (*Our Home* 1976a, 9). The magazine brought to its readership popular accounts of the new kinds of living problems posed by the high-density, highrise life, ranging from the dangers of littering from a height (‘killer litter’), the mis-use of shared balcony space, urinating in lifts, to the inappropriate time to hang wet clothes or dripping mops from one’s window drying poles. In relation to these problems they suggested more ‘neighbourly’ codes of practice, as well as reminding readers of actions and uses that were specifically against the rules. This instructive discourse reminds us that the re-housed Singaporean was seen by the state as a novice in relation to modern housing and living, such that their mode of inhabitation required direct shaping and regulating so they could maximise the benefit of highrise re-housing. In this sense the HDB was actively constructing and promulgating what Rose (1998, 38) has usefully called ‘repertoires of conduct’ for highrise living. This educative discourse was underscored by a range of explicit regulations that specified punishable offences, as well as surveillance technologies that ensured compliance.

As noted, part of the HDB’s attention in *Our Home* was dedicated to the way the interior of flats might look. Advice on this appeared routinely in a series of regular articles (often under the thematic heading ‘Décor’) from 1972-1982 inclusive and from then on as occasional features. In this sub-genre of article the relationship between the governing of conduct and cultivation of taste through home-based consumption practises is clearly evident. In *Our Home* the matter of ‘making’ the interior of the flat was variously described as ‘interior décor’ / ‘decoration’ / ‘design’, ‘home improvement’ or simply ‘renovation’. The message about what to do with the interior of one’s flat was never communicated in the abstract, or by way of non-HDB homes. All articles featured the efforts of existing HDB residents who had done their interiors themselves, offering photographs of their interiors, and lengthy quotes of these resident’s ‘design’ strategies. The articles are committed to a D-I-Y model of home decoration, although there is a self-conscious conversation with the professionalized field of ‘interior design’. For example, one of the earliest of these

articles invited readers of *Our Home* (1973a, 20-21) to look inside the interior of a ‘decorator’s flat’ in order to see exactly what might happen to an HDB flat with an unlimited budget and at the hands of a professional. That Mr Cheung was an interior designer ‘explains why his home is so beautifully decorated’, helped as he was by his wife, Sum, a ‘keen amateur’. The featuring of a professional was rare, for the main star of these articles was ‘The do-it-yourself decorators’ (*Our Home* 1973b, 21). This said, the vacillation between amateur and professional interior design values appeared regularly in this sub-genre of article. Take, as an example, the article on a flat in Dover Road that began:

‘The owners of this three-bedroom flat ... profess they know very little about interior design. And yet [they] have shown that this so-called handicap has in no way prevented them from turning their ordinary flat into a modern and delightful home’ (*Our Home* 1981a, 20).

In the following issue the featured flat was again owned by someone whose amateur efforts nonetheless managed to achieve a ‘professional touch’:

‘If appearances are anything to go by, one look at Mr Wong’s flat will lead you into thinking that you’ve stepped into an interior decorator’s private apartment His artistry and flair in doing up his home ... has made it comparable to a professional decorator’s’ (*Our Home* 1981b, 18).

The article concluded that despite ‘ambience’, ‘texture’ and ‘character’ being qualities given just the right attention by Mr Wong, these were to him, ‘just vague terms’ (19). Here the intermingling of the ideal and real that constitute the modern interior is well illustrated in that individual home improvement efforts were overwritten with the discourses and visual language of a professionalised field known as ‘interior design’. Furthermore, these ‘designer’ homemakers were called upon to act as models of how other Singaporean homeowners might conduct themselves in relation to their interiors. Thus the HDB resident was equipped not only with ideas of what they too might do in their flat, but also confirmation that one does not need to be a professional to create an ‘interior design’ effect. In this sense, we can see how the HDB sought to cultivate in the modern Singaporean home-owner the figure of the ‘interior designer’, a resident who is able to be an engineer of atmosphere (Baudrillard (2005 (1996), 25 and see Pennartz 1999). This framework for delivering design principles put everyday interpretations and innovations centre stage of the

HDB's interior design story such that modernist design principles were drawn into more ordinary interiors shaped not only by design ideals, but also the pragmatic limits set by residents' budgets, D-I-Y abilities, and existing furniture.

Colour

Colour use was an important part of the advice given to residents through the décor articles in *Our Home*. Considering the indebtedness of the Singaporean highrise to modernist design principles, it is unsurprising that much advice was about 'the dangers of heavy colour' and the practical 'sense' of using lighter colours, especially white (*Our Home* 1978, 21 and 24). As we noted, within modernism whiteness operated to reveal the true function of architectural form, delivering a transparency and clarity of purpose that was without disguise. This vision of architectural clarity was itself entangled with wider notions of modernisation, itself expressed through co-dependent notions of civilisation and cleanliness. For Le Corbusier (1987 (1925), 188) it is through whiteness '*home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is*'. The link between colonial structures of governance (seeing, monitoring and controlling colonial subjects) and ideas of cleanliness is now well documented (see as examples Thomas 1990, Prasha 2001, Manderson 1996, Swanson 1977). In the Singapore colonial context, Yeoh (1996, 215) has documented how sanitation 'produced a public landscape which was orderly, disciplined, easily policed and amenable to the demands of urban development'. In short, a 'sanitized city' was at the same time understood to be a 'progressive, civilized city'. In the context of post-independence Singapore, the emphasis on a clean, orderly city and citizenry remained, but was deployed by a newly empowered local authority in pursuit of its own modernization agenda. Indeed, the modernist housing programme, with its emphasis on transparency and cleanliness, carried much of the practical and symbolic weight of materializing a progressing and civilising Singapore.

Articles from the first decade of *Our Home* (the 1970s), in particular, offered advice that was consistent with modernist principles of interior design and its commitment to white and light interiors. White was routinely advocated, as in this observation: 'there is a sense of spaciousness in the flat – contributed in not small way by the white walls' (*Our Home* 1976b, 26). Or this: 'Walls were all white thus opening out the area. Dark colours would have made the flat look small' (*Our Home*

1977b, 22). Or this: ‘On entering the ... flat ... one is impressed by the spaciousness and simplicity of décor. The living and dining rooms have all-white marble floors and ... [w]alls are white ... [and] white is the dominant colour in the kitchen’ (*Our Home* 1977a, n.p.). Yet there was also ambivalence about going too far with white. For example, one ‘all white’ flat was found to be ‘dazzling’ but also a little ‘clinical’ and in need of ‘softening’ (*Our Home* 1975, 8). Indeed, it was more a palette of colours generally described as ‘neutral’ – beiges and off-whites – that gained the approval of the HDB. Not only did such colours help make flats look ‘airy’ they did not compromise a ‘homely’ atmosphere. To this approved backdrop residents were encouraged to judiciously add other colours in the form of ‘highlight’ or ‘contrast’ or ‘feature’ elements. Mr Lee, for example, was praised for his ‘controlled and cleverly chosen’ use of ‘peacock blue’, ‘flaming red’, and ‘sunshine yellow’ in artwork and his creation of ‘effective spots of colour’ through cushions (*Our Home* 1975, 8). Another ‘modest make-over’ was praised for the ‘nice touches’ delivered by way of ‘paintings’ (calendar prints of local artists’ work) and ‘colourful patchwork cushions’ (*Our Home* 1976b, 26). Yet another D-I-Y improvement was praised for its effective and economical use of ‘decorative accents’ such as a hand-painted feature brick wall. By the 1980s the commitment to white and light walls was waning and alternative looks (including even heavily ornamented wallpaper) were featured in *Our Home* alongside of those schemes more evidently indebted to modernism. This not only reflected changing interior fashions more generally, but also the new consumer freedoms in relation to colour and style afforded by the larger flat sizes.

Clutter

As noted, the inaugural phase of housing provision by the HDB was undertaken in the name of a diagnosed housing crisis such that many of the earliest HDB provisions were very small 1 bedroom (23m²) or 2 bedroom (37m²) ‘emergency’ flats. Even the earliest ‘improved’, ‘standard’ and ‘new generation’ flats could be relatively small. Internal space was always at a premium in early HDB offerings and much of the advice given by way of *Our Home* was directed at solving the space problem with limited financial outlay. For example, almost all the articles on interior decoration in the first two years of *Our Home* advised readers to create a simple, low cost and uncluttered look in their newly acquired flats. This advice came by way of articles

entitled: 'Simple and serene' (*Our Home* 1974) 'Simple and spacious' (1977a, np), 'Original taste yet economical' (*Our Home* 1979, 24), 'Simple arrangements' (*Our Home* 1978, 20), 'Simple does it!' (*Our Home* 1981c, n.p.), and 'All light and space' (*Our Home* 1975, 8), 'Keeping it simple' (*Our Home* 1981a, 20) (Figure 2).

In this context, what to do with 'clutter' was a persistent concern. Indeed, in the advice given about making an appropriate interior for HDB flats it was often assumed that 'design' and 'clutter' were mutually exclusive terms. As Baker (1995, n.p) has noted, clutter takes 'revenge' on design. What produced 'clutter' varied in the pages of *Our Home*: furniture of inappropriate size or poorly arranged, inadequate storage spaces, and of course too many ornaments. Residents are routinely praised for 'resisting ... all temptation to clutter' (*Our Home* 1978, 21) and most of the articles deal in one way or another with this problem. For example, in 1974 Mr Eng Siak Loy shared with others his opinion of clutter:

'I avoid cluttering the flat with bulky and fanciful furniture Most people are inclined to do that. However, if they want their flat to be spacious as well as attractive, they can easily create space by choosing the right kind of furniture and arranging it in the right places' (*Our Home* 1974, 38).

Again, in 1981 we visited the home of Mr. Chou Kin Loong who also 'believes in keeping things simple':

'(n)o ornaments, none of the knick-knacks one usually finds in abundance in so many other flats. Just simple, clean-cut furnishing which makes the flat more comfortable than trendy, and a good example of wise budgeting' (*Our Home* 1981c, 18)

In a similar vein we are introduced to the 'elegance' of Mr Tan's flat within which 'there is none of the usual ornamental flora and knick knacks that new home owners are wont to decorate their flats with' and where '[o]nly functional furniture greets the visitor' (*Our Home* 1980a, 18). And then there were newly-weds, Linda and Derrick Fitzgerald, who simply 'don't believe in storing junk' and only kept 'what they really need' (*Our Home* 1973b, 21-22). In these examples the ethos of utility operated as a defence against clutter.

As Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003, 236) note, the elimination of clutter is not simply produced by the choice not to ornament, it is also a product of how one deals with the 'problem' of objects that fall frequently out of use, and which are in need of

hiding ('storage'). Storage, they argue, 'is key to understanding how people create order in the home and the world' (Cwerner and Metcalfe, 2003, 229). *Our Home* articles showcased numerous resident-devised innovations for clever storage including adding storage capacity to existing furniture and fixtures. For example, a very early article advised residents as to how they could 's-t-r-e-t-c-h that space' by using the space above the television for storage, or adding shelves to the back of doors, or fitting drawers below settees (*Our Home* 1973c, 15-16). Another resident advised readers to avoid, admittedly more economical, 'readymade furniture'. His built-in unit, it was observed, 'both acts as a utility and decorative item', and 'as [it] has numerous compartments and cupboards, it cuts down on clutter, as everything that was necessary but should be put out of sight was neatly tucked away in the cupboards' (*Our Home* 1977b, 21-22).

Ornament

Although obsessed with the 'problem' of clutter, the HDB décor advice did not consistently promote the elimination of ornament. Indeed, ornament was seen to have the power to deliver to domestic interiors a sense of 'personal touch' and 'atmosphere', in a manner that resonated quite remarkably with the very nineteenth-century European interior that modernism shunned. *Our Home* articles encouraged residents to create, in modest and controlled ways, a range of theatrical and phantasmagorical effects. Many of the interiors showcased, including those praised for their use of neutral tones and management of clutter, used ornaments, wall and floor finishes and soft furnishings such as shag pile rugs, plush carpeting, 'big comfy armchairs', gold damask curtains, chandeliers, even Victorian look furniture. Take Dorothy Khoo's flat, which aspired to 'have something different from the usual':

'... home decorations include carved wood statuettes, ancient vases, Chinese porcelain – most of which are prized collections of older generations. To counter-balance these antiques of the Orient, decoupages, attractive pictures and a gilt-frame mirror adorn the walls' (*Our Home* 1979, 25).

Asian ornament was commonly featured and articles described flats containing ornamental objects such as a bamboo lamp from Jakarta, a bed in a 'pseudo-Chinese' style, a Namdas Kashmiri rug, a painting of Malay women, Chinese calligraphic hangings, batik paintings and woodcarving. A good example was the flat of the Ng

family whose ‘exquisite display cabinet’ presents a ‘fascinating range of bric-a-brac that have made it to the [their] flat across continents and oceans’, including a giant lobster from Indonesia, a clay dancer from India, and a Taiwanese ornamental umbrella.

Another interior that repeatedly appeared in the pages of *Our Home* belonged to an advertisement by Credit POSB, a state-run bank which offered a ‘Renovation Loan Scheme’ for residents to re-decorate their homes. Again the interior in this advertisement combines certain features of a modernist aesthetic (white walls most notably) along with a floor-to-ceiling photo-montage of a wintry landscape, a mosaic coffee table and lamp with Thai motifs, and a painting in traditional Balinese style (Figure 3). It is clear from these examples, that the Asian-ness of these flats is not an expression of some intrinsic cultural trait, struggling to find expression against a modernist architecture. Rather, it is a regionally-inflected taste culture embedded in the logics of consumption and within which originary cultural traits jostle with the artefacts and atmospheres of other Asias.

Indeed by the 1980s the way in which these eclectically ‘oriental’ interiors are described is almost oblivious to any design constraints that may exist by virtue of the architecture. In an article explicitly entitled ‘The flat where East meets West’ (*Our Home* 1980b, 12) (Figure 4) we are introduced to a householder who has deployed ‘the best of both worlds’. Having ‘his roots in his past’ amateur artist Mr Leong used ‘oriental themes in his works of art’ and chose ‘oriental ornaments to decorate his flat’. But what this article dubbed as the ‘orientalism’ of this décor, was set against ‘Western furnishings’: a ‘comfortable ... sofa’ and ‘a glass display cabinet’. In 1987 this theme was revisited by way of another flat in which there was ‘a comfortable mix of many cultures’: samurai sword, Chinese paintings, Italian dining setting, and ‘knick-knacks from Europe’. According to the article, this worldly display was less a product of ‘design’ than simply assembling the varied wedding gifts bestowed upon this household’s by its well-travelled relatives and friends. As the article concludes: ‘After a hard days work at the office, the Tohs are only too glad to come home to their comfortable haven with its distinctive min ‘n’ match décor of East and West’ (*Our Home*, October 1987, 20).

We have already discussed the problem of storage in the earlier HDB interiors, but storage is a system that is intended to deal with items that fall out of use (either

temporarily or permanently). The ornament requires a different structure of housing for as long as it is on display its visual work in producing atmospheric effect is never done. While Singaporean housing emerged out of a modernism indifferent to display and ornament, the ‘space sensible’ display cabinet became an often featured item in *Our Home*. Through these articles it is clear that the Singaporean interior was full of collections and curios of various kinds, all of which needed to be displayed. Mrs Meng, for example, chose to put her ‘collection of odd pieces of beautiful crockery and pottery’ in a ‘teak sideboard’ and a ‘glass-fronted showcase in blackwood’ (*Our Home* 1976b, 26). Mr Wong, whose bespoke furniture we have already seen, elected to use a wall unit that not only hid clutter, but also displayed ‘all the living room essentials like a TV set, stereo, books and curios’ (*Our Home* 1977b, 22). This hybrid system of storage and display was aptly expressed through an article entitled, ‘Hide and Show’. The article features a kitchen renovation based on built-ins which could be used, on the one hand, to hide unpleasant-to-look-at kitchen utensils and ‘odds and ends’, but on the other hand, showcase those items one would ‘love to show’ on an ‘elegant display shelf’ (*Our Home* April 1980c, 14).

In the final years of the interior decoration articles in *Our Home*, the drift toward an ever-more ornamented interior reminiscent of the very European interiors modernism deplored appeared almost complete. In an article entitled “The Continental style” (*Our Home* June 1985) a home was featured in which, on entering, the visitor was ‘transported at once to the atmosphere of a house in a small town in Europe’ and brought back ‘to the times of King Louis the fourteenth’. The owner, Mr Chan, himself imported European furniture, no doubt servicing a growing local market. In another home featured we encountered the very first interior that was acknowledged not to be the product of the creativity of its owners but the ‘Italian-style’ vision of a ‘renovation contractor’ (*Our Home* 1989a, 28-29). But perhaps the stylistic destiny of the Singapore interior is best summarised by the last of the décor features to appear in the final edition of *Our Home*, published in August/September 1989. In a feature entitled ‘Vast Variations’ (*Our Home* 1989b, 29-30), two HDB homes are featured: one based on a ‘hi-tech’ minimalism but incorporating the ‘folly’ of a reproduction London phone booth; the other a heavily ornamented interior that made it ‘just like a cottage housed in a HDB flat’ (Figure 5). While modernity’s progressive drive seems to be elegantly and effortlessly demonstrated throughout the

urban spaces of this city state – in civic and commercial architecture, public squares and precincts, transportation systems, and service infrastructures – here in the HDB domestic interior we find a more telling, dialectical image of Singapore’s modernity in which past and future are locked together in an anachronistic embrace.

Containing creativity

Throughout these articles on interior décor the presence of the resident decorator operated to confuse the boundary between state prescription, professionalized design style, and individual expression. In the articles this was often encapsulated in the positively inflected term ‘individuality’, and elaborated with terms like ‘creativity’, ‘originality’ and ‘imagination’. Individuality in style and taste was routinely promoted as a desirable trait for the modern Singaporean home-owner. Many of the featured residents themselves embodied the notion of the ‘artistic’ and ‘creative’ resident, being occasionally professional ‘designers’ of one kind or another, or more usually residents with ‘amateur’ art hobbies who were able to report on their own inexpensive D-I-Y efforts to add creative touches to their homes (fabric hangings, macramé, mosaic tabletops, paintings, murals etc.). As one article concludes:

‘Creating a complete and fulfilling furnishing scheme isn’t strictly conditioned by your capacity to write out large cheques Successful decoration is just as dependent on thoughtful planning, awareness of colour and that touch of individuality which totally transforms a room’ (*Our Home* 1980b, 12).

But the principles of individuality written into the HDB interior rest on a finely balanced ratio of decorating action to atmospheric effect. The exemplary cases that feature in *Our Home* all represent specified taste incursions that are expressed in consistently modest terms – ‘touches’, ‘spots’ and ‘accents’. These incursions become effective (i.e. appropriate) marks of individuality only if they can be shown to have a positive effect on the atmosphere of the whole room or flat. The excessive application of too dark or ‘heavy’ a colour or the excessive display of ornament in a flat is deemed an ill-judged design decision as it compromises the sense of space and openness of the interior.

Furthermore the acts of individuality encouraged in relation to HDB interiors was in stark contrast to the kinds of expression allowed in relation to the exterior of the HDB blocks and estates. Resident changes to the external fabric of HDB flats and

blocks has always been prohibited. There is little explicit reflection on the reasons for such prohibitions, and certainly what reflection there is links it directly to practical questions of structural integrity and safety, as opposed to a commitment to a modern aesthetic. Indeed, as the design history of housing provision by the HDB testifies, the HDB quickly moved from a commitment to a purist modernist aesthetic in external design to a range of managed interventions directed at bestowing upon individual estates a unique identity. With the original modernist blocks, this included painting giant murals onto the exterior walls, but with newer blocks this involved integrating pre-fabricated ornamental panels, distinctive rooflines and coloured building materials. But for all this, the emergent visual ‘diversity’ of the HDB fabric remained firmly in the hands of HDB architects, working in conjunction with the Prefabrication Technology Centre. Each time the Singaporean homeowners deliberately or accidentally ‘expressed’ themselves on the exterior of the building, the HDB intervened with new regulations and alternate design solutions. For example, in the name of safety, a suite of regulations forbade residents from hanging or suspending objects from the balcony areas (including plants). The drying of clothes by way of distinctive bamboo rods extended from the buildings has been managed by the state with increasing intensity. Initially the very visible rod drying technology was provided for on the rear of blocks but, as time went on, rods were secreted away in external recesses. Similarly, the visual dilemma produced by a proliferation of individual household television aerials was resolved in the late 1960s by the installation of collective aerials. It would seem that in the Singapore housing system individual expression has its limits, and that limit is contained within the interior.

Conclusion

The role of the interior in the development of a ‘home owing democracy’ in post-independence Singapore reminds us that aesthetic debates about interiors implicate far more than matters of style. They reflect, as well as shape, the social, political and economic spheres of life. Furthermore, modernist style, although based on and aspiring towards universally applicable design principles, was a situated production, both in terms of its ‘ideals’ and its various ‘realities’. Indeed, the close relationship between modernist design principles and more widely conceived reforms meant that it was a style readily absorbed into a variety of political and social projects, including

that of Singapore's post-independence programme to house a nation. In this practical enactment of the modern style, the interior came into being by way of a complex dialogue between the modernisms evident on drawing boards, those articulated in political rhetoric, those modelled in displays or captured in magazines, those constructed by bureaucracy, and those aspired to by residents. In this sense the practical making of the modern home in Singapore (as elsewhere) was a multi-media event.

In post-independence Singapore 'disciplinary modernisation' (Wee 2001) meshed with the 'discipline of the market' (Chua 1997) in a process of mass housing provision. In this system 'aesthetic elements' and the look of the interior played a special role within Singapore's wider developmental drive, acting both as a source and setting for change. Modernist highrise housing was not simply a constraint on a pre-given, but now mis-housed, Singaporean subject, but quickly came to be one of the key sites through which the post-independence Singaporean subject was made and made themselves. The Singaporean state played a significant role in this process, advising as it did on style and determining physical and aesthetic limits to the extent of creative expression. Yet the novice homeowner enthusiastically played their part too, carefully modelling their newly acquired interiors to their own aspirations. Indeed we hope that this paper has shown how the cultivation of the interior became central to the 'covenant' between people and state.

In the specific context of post-independence Singapore, the aesthetic objectives of interior design, as expressed through the amateur and quasi-professional efforts of the HDB and its residents, serve a localised, state-led project of ensuring that the residents of this novel, highrise, high-density environment know how to live in a 'proper' way. The articles in *Our Home* do not simply deliver a formula for creating modern interiors, they also furnish residents with the 'taste' equipment necessary to properly manage the consumption opportunities delivered into their hands by this new form of housing. *Our Home* sought then to develop the 'personal capacities' of subjects to be 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Flint, 2003, 614). In this sense, the modern Singaporean interior was a product of the micro-politics of state, subjectivity and built form. In this process of governing the Singaporean interior it was transformed into a place where individual creative expression was at once cultivated and contained. As the pages of *Our Home* show, interior creativity needed

to be carefully calibrated, such that the aesthetic and economic investments it entailed did not become excessive. Space constraints, concerns about appropriate ways of inhabiting highrises, and a state interest in keeping the exterior look and material integrity of estates, meant that creative interventions had to be restrained, permitting only specific colour palettes and judicious levels of ornamentation. That such restraint was needed, became only too clear when, in the 1980s, a task force found that the level of economic investment Singaporeans were making in home decoration and renovation was so excessive it was seen to threaten the very economic survival of the nation.

In finally concluding let us reflect back again to the HDB Gallery display which gave such prominence to the interior through its staged recreations of Singaporean interiors old and new. The story there began with a ‘pre-modern’ kampung interior, and moved inexorably towards contemporary display flats. The early Kampung interior appears utterly out of place and of another time compared to the domestic culture of contemporary Singapore. Indeed, *Cogito Image* the ‘space branding’ firm that designed and installed the display, admitted that its designers had to travel to Malaysia to source all the props for this display. It is easy when faced with such evidence (be it the front stage or back stage version of it) to script Singaporean modernism as an alien force, displacing, even erasing, local domestic forms. But the story we have told has sought to counter act both developmentalist stories of modernisation and nostalgic stories of loss. The prescribed modern Singaporean interior does not simply confirm a global story of the spread of modernism. Nor does the practised interior signal a simplistic return of tradition. Rather, the post-independence Singaporean interior embodies an alternative modernity. Its alterity is not based in a straightforward expression of difference – the emergence of a so-called Asian interior expressing individually enacted, ‘cultural’ responses to an externally imposed modernism. The evidence from *Our Home* suggests that the post-independence Singaporean home-maker, encouraged by the state, assembled interiors modelled out of meshing the professional with do-it-yourself, the new with the inherited, the modern with the traditional, the global with the local. Indeed, the modern Singaporean interior was often a fantasy creation drawing both on past times and other places. Within these interiors, any ‘Asian-ness’ evident was not linked to a residual or resistant cultural presence, but to consumer patterns which mixed and

matched objects sourced in various Asian and South-east Asian localities with local interpretations of European interiors, both modern and traditional. Indeed, the alterity of Singapore's modernism lies firmly in its willingness to accommodate the very type of ornamented and phantasmagorical interior styling with which its European predecessor could not live.

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¹ The visual resonance between the backward looking museum and the forward looking show homes is a result of both having been produced by the same design consultancy.

² The HDB is a statutory board so technically has its own ‘legal personality’ but, as Tan (1998, 138) notes, it is ‘synonymous with the Government’, receiving large grants and benefiting from various state subsidies.