

For Review only

From communal villages to high-rise flats, how has the "kampung spirit" of old survived the transition? For those who call Waterloo Centre home, sharing comes organically. A funeral turns private grief into public spectacle – a community appears, gathers, mourns and then disappears...

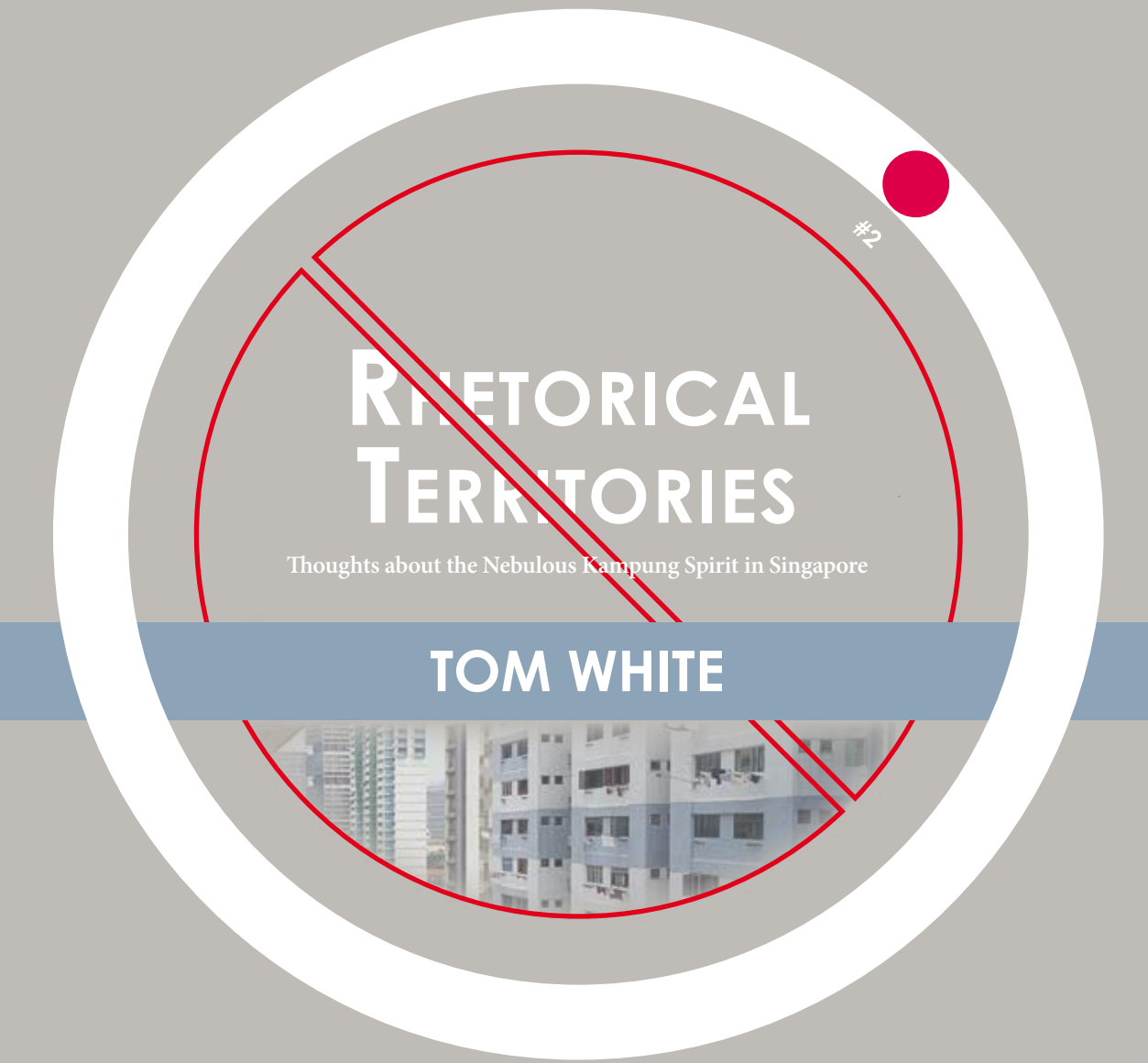
In **Rhetorical Territories**, photographer Tom White memorably captures how this coexistence takes place at every moment through subtle acts of "negotiation" rather than government policy.

The book also documents the responses of 40 viewers from all walks of life. Their thoughts offer us a fascinating look at private versus public space, cultural belonging, and the meaning of home in Singapore.

Tom White (Singapore-based, Yorkshire-born) is an independent photographer working in documentary, journalism, and editorial photography. He also conducts workshops at Singapore's Objectifs Centre for Film and Photography and teaches documentary arts and photojournalism at Yale-NUS College. He has previously taught at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and the International Center of Photography. His work has been published and exhibited internationally. Tom is a graduate of Goldsmiths (University of London) and the International Center of Photography in New York.

Alfian bin Sa'at contributes a set of haikus inspired by Tom White's photographs. Writer, poet, and resident playwright at theatre group WILD RICE, Alfian has written many award-winning literary and stage works.

Exactly Foundation is a not-for-profit, trademarked registered label established by Li Li Chung to commission photographers to create works that stimulate discussion of social concerns in Singapore. Its goal is to produce new knowledge by having viewers engage with the photographs and share them with friends and family over a 2–3-month period.



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RHETORICAL TERRITORIES

Thoughts about the Nebulous Kampung Spirit in Singapore
Photographs by Tom White

EDITED BY Li Li Chung
WITH POEMS BY Alfian bin Sa'at

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CONTENTS

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Part 1: The Residency

Foreword	4
Word from the 'Wart Li Li Chung	
Artist's Statement	12
Tom White	
Photographs	16
WITH Rhetorical Haikus by Alfian bin Sa'at	

Part 2: The Responses

Around-the-Table	32
Peer Dialogue	47
ALT-TOPIA: 'HDB' by The Proletariat	
Poetry Factory	57
Tom White	
Rhetorical Scrapbooks – Some Thoughts on Process	62
Tom White	

Word from the 'Wart'¹

Li Li Chung

www.exactlyfoundation.com

How does a foreigner understand living in Singapore HDBs (subsidized Housing Development Board housing), which houses more than 80% of people in Singapore? How does it all work in such closed quarters? What is this “kampung spirit”? Tom White from northern England and I were curious. It was trying doing this project but our “subject” Waterloo Centre will always be special as our first foray into HDB living. I am delighted to support this publication of *Rhetorical Territories* by Tom White, which documents Tom’s take on navigating private and public spaces. Tom’s portfolio-making and the extensive viewer discussions were part of his residency at Exactly Foundation in August 2015, the foundation’s second artist residency since its inception in early 2015.

I would also like to thank all involved in *Rhetorical Territories* – the many viewers and fellow photographers who actively participated. Special thanks also go to Alfian bin Sa’at for his amazing haikus (collectively entitled *Rhetorical Haikus*), which accompany each of Tom’s photographs; to Objectifs for helping to stage the exhibition and book launch; and to Jan Chen for this book’s design and layout.

Whose authority is it to mark the spaces in which we live? Don’t we as residents of a place know what we want? Do we have a baseline on privacy that we don’t want others to cross?

What if these spaces flip-flop between private and public?

What is “kampung spirit”? Is there just one version of it? Is it good neighbourly behaviour that gives a warm, fuzzy feeling, a feeling that someone cares? Is it relational harmony or safety or happening-ness or something else? Or if none of the above, do we just want our privacy?

Given so many personal takes, is it even possible that any one authority can define how best to live together... and broad-brush it into all housing planning? Or should it be an iterative process that takes into account the residents’ take on communal living? That could be happening. The new HDBs’ void decks are said to be pass-through corridors on the way to the elevator, not casual gathering places for residents. Is this new design the correct understanding?

I love the discussion that Tom and I had on one of his Waterloo Center photographs, of laundry on poles projecting from a residential unit’s window. Such a common sight that we hardly notice. But the spats we could have over dripping laundry from upstairs. We can all agree that the air outside our window is definitely public space but when *my* laundry-loaded pole goes out, that trajectory and occupation of space is private. When my laundry is dry and retrieved, that space out there reverts to public again.

Many of Tom’s photographs visualize this blurring of public and private space in scenes so common we don’t even see them or mind. Yet, everyone negotiates this spatial occupation, which *Rhetorical Territories* suggests HDB residents have educated themselves to instinctively navigate and conform to. Even synchronizing the acts. So there seems to be an understanding of invisible boundaries and timing. As if to say, *This is how we live together, this is how it works around here.*

Has the “general” definition of kampung spirit run its course? I can see its benefit in the 1970s in allaying the anxieties of village dwellers as they moved to high-rise blocks. My understanding is that this notion evolved from the 1990s onwards into a Singaporean standard of good behaviour, akin to a mark of good citizenry. Today, it is certainly a phrase casually thrown around and broadly understood. But whether everyone is doing the same thing is not clear.

My point is this: leave it. Leave it to the residents to find their own footing on how connections are made and how activities of value to the residents get understood and executed. And exercise what Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey advocate: the right to the city, which Lefebvre defines as people’s “demand ... [for] a transformed and renewed access to urban life”² And not by the individual as a passive recipient but as a responsibility. As Harvey aptly puts it: “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by

changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights”³ So what are the boundaries of governance?

I am delighted that Tom made time to walk and talk Waterloo Centre, particularly as an “outsider” to the Singapore HDB lifestyle, being born and raised in northern England. I cannot help but imagine Tom’s sensitivity to the utter precarity and renewed resilience loaded onto the common man brought on by the life-changing public policies during the decade of Margaret Thatcher’s government. He writes: “I still hold true to these roots and no matter where I am, I will always be a ‘Northerner’”⁴ – an identity that informs his perceptions of public housing, its architectural configurations and the social engagement that makes a place.

¹ 'Wart is short for Stalwart – Exactly Foundation’s Stalwart – which Exactly’s first resident artist Kevin WY Lee suggested that I write as.

² Henri Lefebvre (1968), *Le Droit à la ville*. Also Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, p. 158.

³ David Harvey (2008), “The Right to the City”, *New Left Review* 53, pp. 23–40.

⁴ <http://www.tomwhitephotography.com/bio>

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Rhetorical Territories¹

Tom White

In the heart of the city, an apartment complex stands tall. Calm above the street, nebulous connections trace paths through the space.

"No chicken rice today, only pork rice." The hawker grins at me. Sold out again. Not surprising. This chicken rice stall is famous. The pork is good too.

On the fifth-floor void deck, a solitary figure strolls about, two small dogs chasing each other at his heels. A man several floors above spots me gazing up and nods at me with a grin.

Along the corridor, I get asked if I have just moved in. People know an unfamiliar face. "It's like an oasis here, separated from the street," a resident tells me. "We like it like that."

At the funeral wake held in the art space, Roy, who works the chicken rice stall, comes up to me. "Many photos tonight?" he asks. "A few," I reply. He gestures with a nod at the gathering around us. "My relatives," he states.

Public housing is one of Singapore's success stories, and is often held up as a shining example of how the city-state has modernised and provided for its citizens in the 50 years since its independence. Regularly quoted statistics show that over 80% of Singapore's residents live in HDB (Housing Development Board) public housing and 90% of these are home-owners.

In the words of the official narrative and as stated in the National Heritage Board publication *Who's Your Neighbour?*, the HDB block is "a high-rise village of people of different origins, traditions and mother tongues who have learned to live together in harmony."²

Unlike the vernacular spaces of other cities, Singapore's high-density urban environment exhibits a high degree of planning and this includes spaces specifically designed to foster community engagement and interaction. Common corridors, void decks, local amenities and open, mixed-use spaces are all carefully integrated into urban planning design.

Though generally regarded as a highly successful programme, Singapore's public housing has to a certain degree been thrust upon the population. The well-documented shift from overcrowded shophouse ghettos and kampung villages to towering HDB blocks did not happen entirely without resistance. Perhaps recognising

the effects of this displacement in part gave rise to the invention of the "kampung spirit" narrative, which emerged as part of the government campaigns promoting HDB living.

While understandably and deservedly proud of HDB public housing, I cannot help but wonder what these spaces might become were they allowed to grow organically.

Aspects of the unplanned, the personal and the private all infringe upon public spaces and their designated uses. The open space for meeting your neighbour becomes instead one where privacy is sought. The common corridor becomes divided as ownership of the space in a radius outside one's front door is individually claimed.

The proposition that "Bad housing produces good street life"³ then begs the question, "What does good housing produce?"

In the density of urban living, a peculiar aspect of which is the closed private space of the individual home – just one unit among many, all superficially the same – an inevitable tension between the public and the private arises, with the potential to disrupt the carefully constructed conditions for community ideals.

Here, in the eventual ruins of progress that an archaeology of the future will unearth, an

acceptance of the terms of social housing for the sake of pragmatism is coupled with a fiercely guarded privacy that defies the coercive kampung spirit narrative perpetuated in government literature.

The non-space of the void deck – its very name conjuring up the dichotomy of an empty space both welcoming and hostile – is but temporarily occupied. Many residents of Waterloo Centre bypass the fifth-floor void deck and the commercial spaces below on their way to and from their homes on the floors above. A "buffer" against the outside world was how one resident described it to me.

Yet the outside world is closing in. The city continues to grow. "I used to be able to see the sea," said another resident, talking about a time long past. Now the surrounding buildings offer up a view of concrete, steel and glass.

On the ground floor, the most bustling of the public spaces in Waterloo Centre, a territorialization of public spaces for private use takes place, producing an ever-shifting ownership within, and sometimes clashing against, the boundaries

¹ The title references Vincent Descombes' "rhetorical country". This is a place in which a person feels at home due to the fact they are able to be understood and to understand others based upon a shared rhetoric, a cultural commonality.

² "Who's Your Neighbour?" – a guide published in 2014 by the National Heritage Board in collaboration with the National Integration Council and The Housing Development Board. http://www.nhb.gov.sg/~media/nhb/files/sharedhtml/whos_your_neighbour.pdf?la=en accessed 02/11/2015.

³ *Public Space: Design, Use and Management*. Edited by Chua Beng Huat & Norman Edwards, National University of Singapore. Centre for Advanced Studies. (Singapore University Press, 1992), p4.

of public authority and the desires of other occupants. On the floors above, in the void deck, in lifts and along common corridors, brief encounters form networks while the designated public space remains frequently empty, a temporal void, rarely filled, mostly waiting.

As the sociologists Ooi Giok Ling and Thomas Tan note:

“The social significance of public space has to be understood and given the necessary emphasis if their roles as settings and catalysts for social interaction are to be maximized. The patterns of use of the public places in HDB estates illustrate that different places accommodate the various routines of residents. These spaces, therefore, assume varying social significance for the residents, depending on the latter’s lifestyles and routines.”⁴

A funeral turns private grief into public spectacle. A community appears, gathers, mourns and then disappears. The place becomes once again a non-place, “the palimpsest on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.”⁵

In Waterloo Centre, an urban oasis, the dynamics of the public-private continuum give rise to what may be an example of Foucault’s heterotopia⁶ – a space that contains the potential for the affirmation of difference and multiple uses.

Interestingly, it is in the possibilities of the public space so essential to the planning success of the HDB public housing programme that the organic emergence of a community, a liberty and the expression of a community spirit may happen, perhaps despite rather than because of the implementation of any particular policy.

⁴ “The Social Significance of Public Spaces in Public Housing Estates” by Ooi Giok Ling & Thomas T.W. Tan, in *Public Space: Design, Use and Management*, edited by Chua Beng Huat & Norman Edwards, National University of Singapore. Centre for Advanced Studies. (Singapore University Press, 1992), p80.

⁵ See *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* by Marc Augé, translated by John Howe (Verso, 1992), p79.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in October, 1984, under the title of “Des Espace Autres”. Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> accessed 02/11/2015.

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#2: The Cleaner's Store

© Tom White at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2015

Invisible nets
Stretching between metal poles
Shuttlecock echoes

(Rhetorical Haikus, Alfian bin Sa'at)



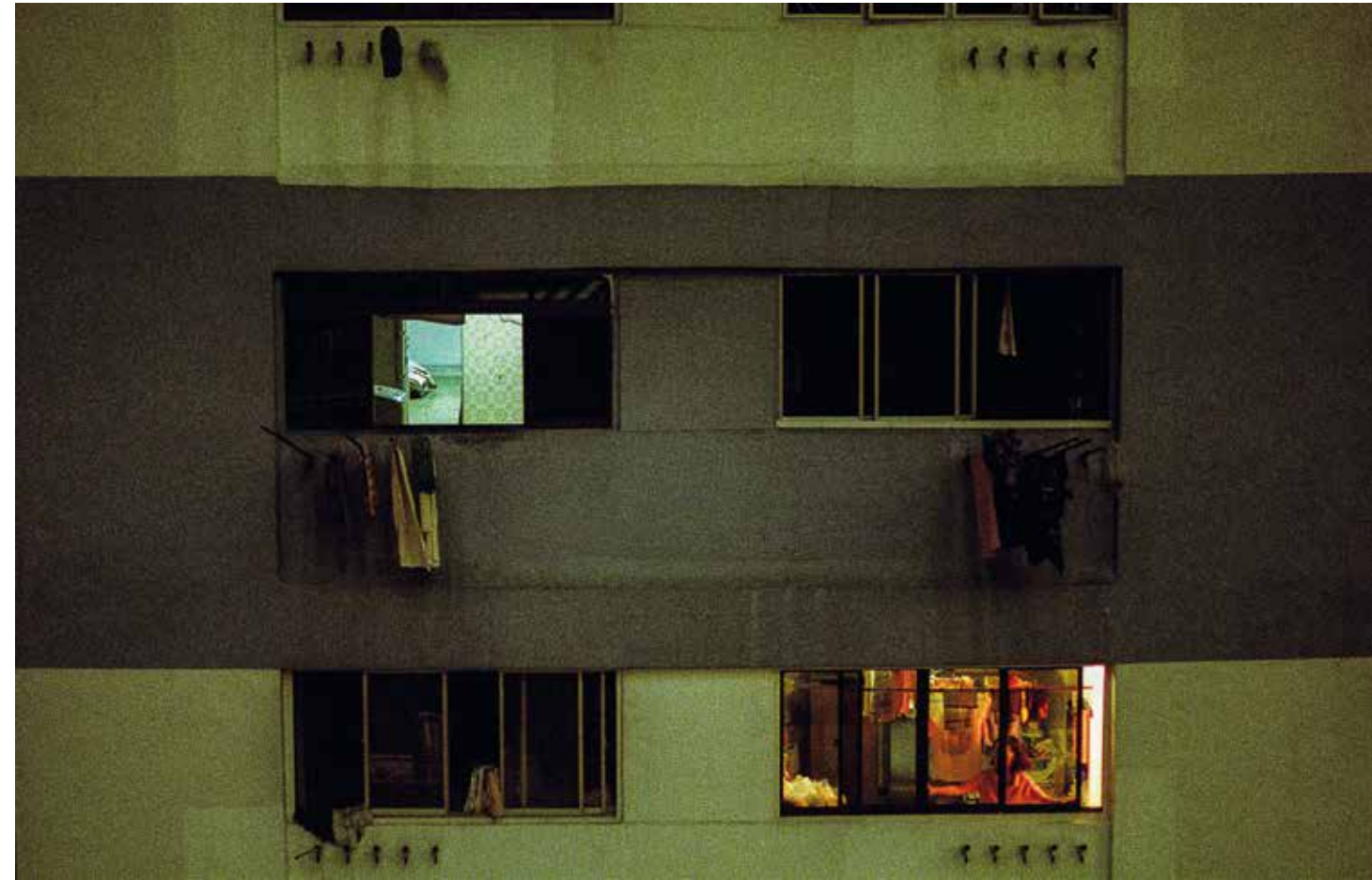
#3: The Harmonica Player

© Tom White at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2015

Picture has no sound
Player sitting on a bench
Waveforms on backrest

(Rhetorical Haikus, Alfian bin Sa'at)

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#15: The Upper Floors

© Tom White at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2015

Sometimes they look like
Afterimages on walls
When frames are removed

(Rhetorical Haikus, Alfian bin Sa'at)

Jane Jacobs

Yale-NUS College, Director of the Division of Social Sciences and Professor of Urban Studies

Response

1. *The event.*

I love the soiree format. That alone gave me a lot of ideas for how to proceed with work ideas in collaboration. So, thank you!

2. *The images/photos – as a project*

As an essay on Waterloo Centre and those who use it, I found the images very thought-provoking. My husband Stephen and I did a lot of work on Block 22 in Bukit Ho Swee a long time ago and faced similar circumstances and challenges in recording; we were not working only or mainly in photographs, but some of the time we were. So, one immediate response I had was being taken back to the question of how one frames/see/represents the high-rises in Singapore.

One of the challenges is the outsider's eye. What a non-Singaporean angmo might see as novel, amazing, shocking, enchanting is really part of the everyday background to life – the quotidian – for the residents.

That fresh eye of enchantment is both good – things overlooked, unseen, are captured for history, for reflection, for contemplation – and runs the risk of being focused on the cliché. I think Tom has avoided the latter largely.

3. *Public Space thought 1 – what is seen*

I was taken by the disjuncture between the photographer's narrative of the images – which was largely focused on the social action – and the images themselves. The images often framed the architectural context very carefully – formalistically. So, symmetry was often strong, or strong architectural elements were used as features defining the composition of the images. Yet little was said of this in the narrative when presenting. For me, this brought to light the blurred line between documentary and art photography.

4. *Public Space thought 2 – the actual public spaces*

There is a lot of interesting “play” with public space in the images, and some quietly pressing questions raised.

Many of the images seem to be communicating public space not quite being used or being used not as programmed. What differences does time of day make? What does it mean that this is an aged block/development demographically? At times, I felt the stillness of the photograph was deaf to temporal shifts and a more mobile choreography of use. So, sequences or series shots are something I would have found interesting. Same space/set-up shot many times.

For me, public space in HDBs in Singapore is both a hymn to humanity (and bureaucracy) and somewhat mean. It is generous and clever in design. It includes the highly regulated, not-quite-public corridors on the older blocks. And it includes voids, quasi arcades near shops, and play and leisure spaces. But it is often noisy, flooded with perpetual light and well, hard (literally). This is especially so in some of the earlier blocks. So, I felt photos like the table and stools, while formally clever, may have overlooked a complex choreography of use or “mis”-use. So again, the tension between an “art choice” and a “documentary goal” comes into view for me.

5. *Public Space thought 3 – liminal spaces*

My sense is that there are lots of liminal spaces in Singapore HDBs of this age. I think the “rear window” shots remind us that privacy in dense environments is provisional and relational (and publicly managed). Similarly, there is wonderful evidence of how people innovate privacy in public spaces.

I enjoyed the images and the event (and the process)! Thank you!

Family/Friends' responses

Anonymous

The Sleeper: Sleeping, but also hiding? Who owns (controls) these urban spaces?

ghosts." Individual people left them, and I love the narrow corridor they are along the street. Randomly placed, but now a perfect pattern.

Anonymous

I love the geometry of Singapore in every photo – the perspective of the corridor, the lines of the roof with bikes. But it's the human touches in “the hungry

Anonymous

The Funeral – This picture spoke to me because of its familiarity. I've lived in HDB housing my whole life. Funerals are normally private affairs but some families

choose to hold it in a public space such as the void deck or the multi-purpose halls at the HDB blocks. At the same time, these public spaces are also host to weddings, parties, grassroots celebrations and recreational activities. I cannot help but think of

the huge number of experiences these spaces have seen and how they've assembled different groups of people with different reasons for being there. In such instances, the HDB has reached its goal of bringing people together in a multiracial and diverse society.

Dan Lin Luo

Waterloo Centre Resident and Elderly Care Professional

First 24-hour Response

Amazed at the power of photography. How pictures and photos can capture moments that tell a thousand words. How a simple picture can invite strangers to have a conversation and speak the same frequency.

I have never really thought how strange it is to hold a funeral at the ground level of a HDB block. It's something very private to the family and yet we have to do it in a public space.

Is this blurring of private and public space something that only happens in land-scarce Singapore? I wonder.

Final Response (about two months later)

12th March 2016

The blurring of private and public spaces. This project helps to create awareness of how we “see” private and public spaces. It sets us thinking about the changes that have happened and how Singapore housing has evolved.

It's great that this art project addresses a societal issue, i.e. spaces, using photography as a medium, involving people, and creating discussion in the process.

Family/Friends' responses

Lynn

Looking at the photos and the concept of “kam-pung spirit” and the current emphasis in the media and by the government on this concept in nation building and taking pride in the various “towns” that we live in, I am sad to say I don't think it exists in Singapore.

I think back to my younger days, when my family lived in one of those flats with common corridors. Even in those days when people kept their doors open, the sense of community was not really there. Perhaps this is in comparison to what I witness when visiting friends who are still living in kampungs in Malacca. There they have a bell in the kampung that is rung when any one of the members of the community passes on. The collective grief and sadness and the support shown to the deceased family really touches me.

looking at the photo of *The Funeral*, I'm struck that something as private as personal loss and grief is on display and a spectacle for all to see. But it's a common occurrence in all estates.

On the flip side, I wonder what goes on in the “private spaces” of homes. The latest concept is to have events such as “Open House”, where art installations are put up in various homes for public guided tour where both the artist and the private space of the resident are on display.

Anonymous

Looking at the pictures, I realize I've never really considered how “space” can tell so much about “life”. I can feel “life” in the corridors, in the open spaces, the shops, the HDBs. But yet, in some photos of spaces that should be places of gathering, I sense the lack of it – the round table, the sleeper. I guess what matters are the people living in the space, and how they use them.

Eunice

In looking at the photographs and hearing about this project, the theme that strikes me is the concept of public versus private spaces. Public housing by definition should fulfil citizens' basic need for shelter, but looking at current HDB prices, it does not seem to be the case. The irony of it is the public provision of the private space of your own apartment. In

Along the same thought, a public space can be a private – the harmonica player, the art space, the auntie's chair; and a private space can be a public one – the card players, the upper floors, the renovation.

It's the people that matter.

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