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Learning to be Modern:
Domesticity and the Modern State in 1970s Singapore

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Abstract
In 1960, faced with significant housing shortage, Singapore's government established the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to replace the former colonial Singapore Improvement Trust. The HDB was charged with rapidly increasing the scale of construction of social housing, both within the city and in New Towns. The programme was a great success; by the end of the decade the problems of housing shortage and overcrowding had abated, and by 1976 more than half of Singapore's 2.3 million residents lived in HDB flats. For many at this time, moving into HDB flats entailed a dramatic change in lifestyle – through new patterns of domestic life, new community structures, and transformed urban landscapes – and residents often needed to learn to adjust to this new, modern way of living.

In this paper I take as my focus various elements of the media campaigns that were crafted by the state in order to instruct Singaporeans how to live such a 'modern' life in the early 1970s. In particular, I focus on *Our Home* (1973–1992), a magazine published by the HDB, and compare this to earlier state-supported campaigns such as 'Gracious Living' (1971) and the 'Singapore Garden City' (1967). Through this media we can question what being 'modern' meant in post-colonial Singapore, which went far beyond the adoption of modern architectural forms, and instead looked toward an economic reconstruction that linked to politics and the shaping of national character. *Our Home*, which took the guise of an interior decoration magazine, I argue, was a form of social contract. Among its lessons in how to furnish a flat, readers were also taught how to negotiate the new urban and cultural environment they found themselves within, what behaviours were expected of them, and what they should provide in return. The magazine acted as an instructional guide for Singapore's modern citizenship.

Introduction

It's my aim in this presentation to see the discussion of modern domesticity in independent Singapore through a magazine called *Our Home*, which launched in 1972 and ran until 1989. The magazine was a state instrument, being published by the government's Housing and Development Board, and being issued free to all households in HDB and Jurong Town Corporation flats, which from 1976 meant at least half of the national population.

I plan to discuss here how *Our Home* in the 1970s, which took the form of a domestic decoration magazine, acted as an instrument for ongoing national identity construction and the transformation of state modernisation schemes in the way that it progressed earlier political discourse and policy. In this process of national modernisation it entwined the worlds of living, work and leisure, and it becomes quite difficult to disentangle these and discuss the modern approach to only one area.

Economic Modernisation in Singapore (1960s)

In this case, with regard to Singapore's material and visual culture of the mid-twentieth century, we can say that the process of postcolonial modernisation extends in two phases from the early 1950s to the early 1980s.

From the 1950s, when decolonisation plans were developing, the concern was state security and stability, and economic modernisation was a key driver of change. Such plans, being developed with colonial British authorities and

United Nations support, were imbued with mid-century western concepts of modernisation theory, which largely held that as new states adopted (primarily) capitalist western styled economic systems they gradually formed more secure democratic systems.

Economic modernisation involved opening Singapore to international capitalism, inviting foreign investment as western companies were enticed to open factories in Singapore's new demarcated industrial territories. This occurred in the 1960s largely with the intention of creating large numbers of jobs, at a time that the city was experiencing large scale underemployment and as the the post-war baby boom was about to dangerously flood the labour market with working-age Singaporeans. Under the advice of the Dutch economist Albert Winsemius, the way to secure Singapore's survival was to adopt an open attitude to the capitalist west, remove any elements of socialism from national politics, and open Singapore to global markets. Thus Singapore's economic modernisation was a strong encouragement toward westernisation, which we might say was opportunistically offered as advice (in a Cold War setting), but also opportunistically received (in the context of cold relations with new neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia).

Our Home *editorial team, 1973, as pictured in* Our Home

The economic development of early independent Singapore is only indirectly linked to the kinds of modern lifestyle that can be found in *Our Home*, though we do find the magazine reporting on the kinds of opportunities that were later being afforded to industrial workers. However there were important ways that economic reform shaped lifestyle development, and directly informed the kinds of living and interior environments promoted by the HDB.

To be brief, across the 1960s, foreign factories moved many Singaporeans for the first time into regular waged work, and the end of the decade there was actually a labour shortage. Through this period, the Housing and Development Board, which had been set up in 1960 to solve the city's housing shortage had also been successful, and moved from a rental system to leasehold ownership. The housing provided mortgages, which ensured the need for regular work, which kept the economy going. The HDB's adoption of the New Town model aimed to bring together living and working environments, ensuring a local residential population ready to work in the factories. The domestic sphere and the labour sphere were both part of a wider planning strategy, and it can be argued that approaches to industrial modernisation shaped the contemporary approach to mass housing housing development under the purview of the HDB.

Lifestyle modernisation in Singapore (1970s)

What is often framed as the Emergency period of the 1960s – this was the time of dissolution of union with Malaysia, the housing crisis, the population time bomb – emphasised the economic establishment of a modern Singaporean state. But by the later 1960s in political rhetoric this began to change. The emerging successes of earlier government plans gave room to discuss how people ought to live, and how they wanted to live; but this was also enacted through top-down intervention.

In 1967, politicians started talking about Singapore as a 'garden city', emphasising the potential of visual pleasure in what was becoming an industrialised landscape. This was still part of global investment marketing, hoping to show Singapore as controlled, reliable, and pleasant, though it had clear lifestyle benefits for residents as well. And in 1968, politicians began to tentatively talk about 'gracious living', which started as a way of embedding art and nature into a hard-working life. Planning and political rhetoric therefore began to attend to the potential pleasures of the modern city – its beauty, but also its amenities. It's at this time that the HDB moves away from their period of emergency housing, and begin to develop a more rounded New Town lifestyle – creating policies for the provision of sporting and leisure grounds, town squares, cinemas and libraries, which are first completed in their Queenstown estate in 1971.

Our Home, when it launches a year later, plays a key role in communicating this change to the wider public. The magazine provides regular announcements of HDB developments – new estates, new planning principles, the ways older emergency flats were being converted into new larger family flats, and visually striking designs for children's playgrounds and swimming pools.

As part of this as well, the magazine needed to explain to people how to live in these new high-rise environments. The HDB estates were modern simply in the sense of their marked disconnection from both Singapore's rural and urban domestic past. They placed people together in social groupings that previously were not as common, they refocused a collectivist community order to one that emphasised ownership and individualism (and reliance on the central state), and the new building technologies changed everyday mundane habits. The sense of alienation comes through in *Our Home* in articles where the foreign cultural practices of one group need to be explained to another, where basic lessons in other languages are given, where the new characters that one would encounter in HDB corridors are identified so as not to cause alarm, and where basic habits of hygiene and refuse disposal had to be explained.

Our Home, particularly in the 1970s, recognised that many people had been forcibly relocated from village settings to live in new high rise developments, and acknowledged the alien nature of this. And in that sense, parts of the magazine read as an instructional guide for how to navigate this new built environment.

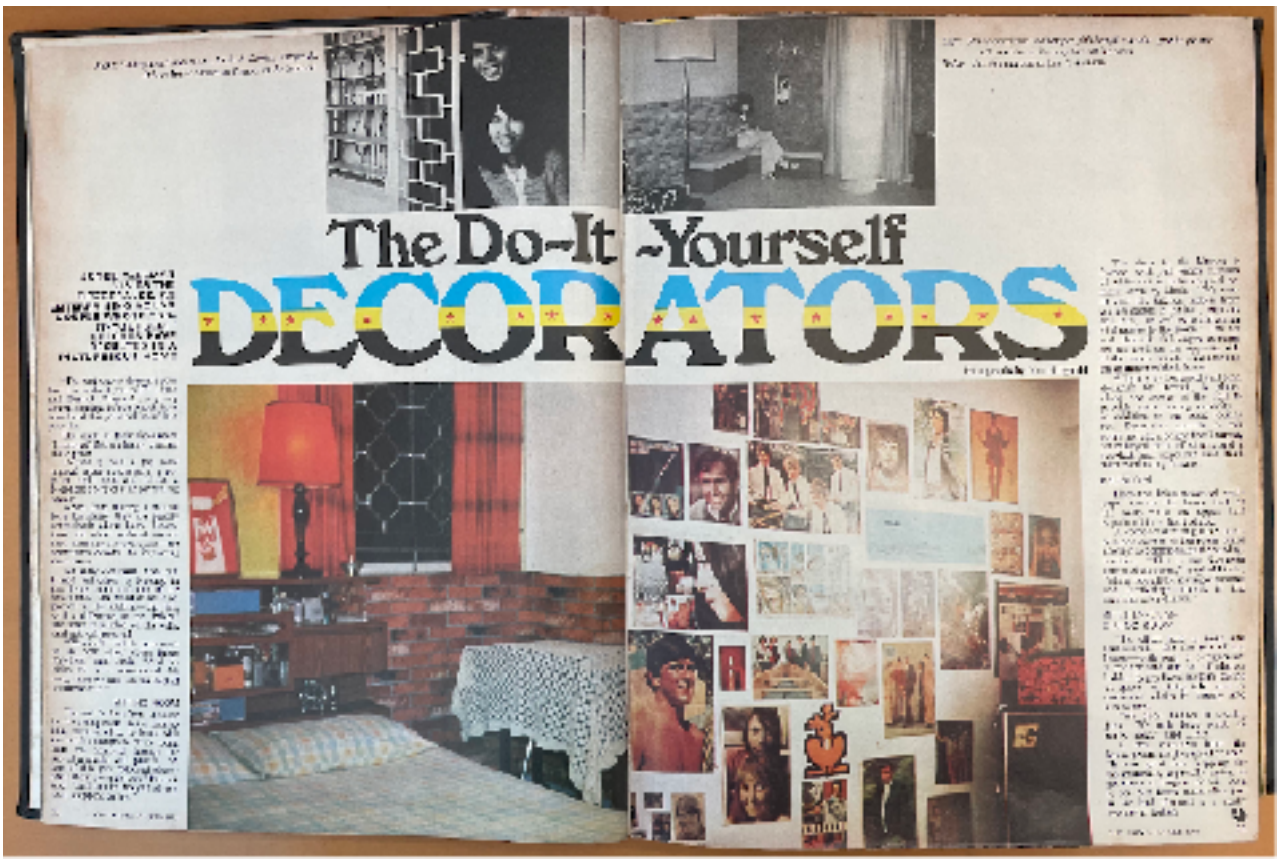
Public engagement

The sense of *Our Home* as educational, as a guide to be enacted in one's own living is important, I think, because it connects the magazine as a state issued narrative to earlier government policies on lifestyle and behaviour in modern Singapore.

The Garden City policy of 1967 is perhaps key here, bridging plans for modernisation between state economy and citizen lifestyle, while being state directed but necessitating citizen action. On one hand, it was geared to creating the impression of an orderly and reliable city state to attract investment, but on the other it was a way of showing citizens the great improvements in living quality that were being made for them, and became applied to ideas of a leisurely lifestyle in the modern urban environment. It was quickly recognised that the policy would not take effect if the population were not incorporated as an informal workforce. As such, media campaigns began to involve people through cleaning events, anti-littering campaigns, horticultural education, and so on.

Our Home continued this aspect of citizen participation, now within the context of HDB Policy, and in the broader notion of 'gracious living'. It did this both through its instructional material on social behaviour, but also through the way it adopted the impression of a DIY home decoration magazine. It encouraged people to find economical ways of dressing up the empty shells of flats that the HDB provided, generally encouraging people to keep to a broadly international standard of decorative modern design typical of the 1970s, which editors of the magazine were generally happy to brand through terms like 'simple' and 'elegant'.

They showed a preference to speak of the artist's home, picking up themes of taste and quality from the early political rhetoric of 'gracious living', but just as gracious living transformed quickly into aspirational materialism, Our Home was a vehicle for entrenching consumer culture in Singaporean's lives – encouraging acquiring objects for the private home, celebrating newly available domestic technologies and appliances, and creating a view of personal betterment through one's ability to a decorate their own flat.



Spread from Our Home*, 1973, emphasising DIY decoration in HDB flats*

And this is how, I think, the different processes of modernisation in Singapore between the 1950s and 1970s connect. What starts as national economic policy opens the city to global capitalism, international brands, and a growing range of new domestic products. Economic policy changes family finances, giving greater personal wealth by the end of the 1960s – which coincides with the opening of the first shopping malls – and it necessitates a new approach to housing that breaks down older communities and places focus on individual ownership.

State level economic modernisation led to the development of a globalised consumer culture, and *Our Home* played a role in promoting this way of living. It did this alongside the promotion of new behaviours, national values and public rhetoric, which was part of the creation of a new Singaporean national character. In many ways, the magazine, which we must remember was a state instrument, acted as an instruction manual for modern citizenship in a newly independent Singapore – relating state policy, explaining new social formations, and explaining the materiality of a new way of life supported by national building schemes. In a form of social contract, consumer lifestyle, was the reward for new citizenship.