

# 'Rethinking Bangkok Domesticity'

## A dialogue between film and critical design thinking

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### Abstract

Home is architectural space to respond to a culture in a stage of shift. Surprisingly little is known about the way people use space, especially in interior design studies in Thailand. Interior designers may provide the blueprints for the spaces in which we live but little works have demonstrates that the significance of building is determined by their occupiers.

The paper discusses the outcome of the work from the Interior Architectural Design Studio at School of Architecture and Design (KMUTT), the ways the studio investigates the lived and the ideal home in Bangkok through the use of film techniques. The studio aims to stretch the limits of conventional interior design studio by introducing the use of film and to explore what can film techniques communicate that drawings and models cannot. The tasks are research based ones as much as to explore different art and design approach. Students address their critiques of contemporary domesticity through 11 individual films based on their homes. Part cultural study, part spatial analysis, part artistic approach, each film reveals domestic space of the home as ordinary, honest and anti-style. This leads to critique on the existing contemporary domesticity including spatial, experiential and perceptive qualities.

**KEYWORDS:** Urban domesticity, Thai domestic interiors, and film about home

### Introduction

Home is a place to live / a place to eat / a place to hide / a place of intimacy. Home is architectural space to respond to a culture in a stage of shift. It addresses a clash between cultural heritage and living culture with informal urban development. Roadsides in Bangkok are now filled with billboards that advertise conveniences of new vertical living and grandiose urban living utopias as means for a better quality of life, a connected urban life and homogeneous social status. Oftentimes, design magazines and advertisement for a family house in Bangkok do not represent the ways majority of residents who live in Bangkok experiencing home today. Asking a question to urban residents: 'what does the home mean to you?' can be problematic. It could be argued that the question was highly ambiguous, and may have prompted ideal responses rather than real experiences. It is not clear whether the

question is asking about the residents' own specific home life or about their general understanding of what the home means. Arguably is the latter, so rather than reflecting their real experiences the residents give descriptive details of the ideal home. We, as urban dwellers in Bangkok, know well that such advertised images are not in anyway near images of the everyday domestic scenes in Bangkok. This becomes crucial for the study of Thai domestic interiors.

In parallel to two current researches on contemporary Thai domestic interiors carried out by Karnchanaporn, the design agenda of the forth year Interior Architectural Design course, undergraduate level, at the School of Architecture and Design (KMUTT) is set to investigate Bangkok's urban domesticity (Karnchanaporn 2008 and 2011). With the intention to explore spatial, experiential and perceptive qualities of the home, the studio then stretches the limits of conventional interior design studio by introducing the use of short film. The tasks are research based one as much as design one. The studio aims to explore and to provide cultural readings of the lived and ideal home in Bangkok by using a different set of tools, apart from drawing and model making. Students in **Rethinking Domesticity** studio address their critiques of contemporary domesticity through 11 individual short films based on their own homes. Each film reveals domestic moment in relations to space of the home as ordinary, honest and anti-style. Far more than expected, the films interestingly touch on our Thai contemporary living conditions: the notion of family, the isolation of home lives, the aging population, the home as a workplace, the new urban living, the traces of ancestor and the ghostly phantasy. Part cultural study, part spatial analysis, part personal anecdote, these films uncover the hidden meaning of the place we call home.

### ***Bangkok Home Lives Project (2008): A research on Bangkok's domestic interiors***

The design agenda of the interior architectural studio Rethinking Domesticity derives mainly from the interest on how evidences of the research on Cultivating the Home: A Study of Thai Dwelling Place with Reference to Domestic Interior from the First National Development Plan (1961-6) to the Present, A Case Study of Bangkok are collected (Karnchanaporn, 2008, chapter 3). In the attempt to generate photographic documents of home as in lived conditions, the Bangkok Home Lives Project had been carried out during 2007 to 2008 as part of the research on the meaning of home for the urban Thais. The project, which is based on photography, grew from (1) great difficulty finding original and current resources on home as it is lived, and from (2) a reading of Kamina Walton's essay on a Blackfriars Photography Project (Walton, 1990). In a similar approach to the Blackfriars Photography Project where photography was used for primary school children in Blackfriars area in order to reflect the diversity of cultures and family structure represented within the school, the Bangkok Home Lives Project asks the householders themselves to produce photographs by using disposable camera. Each participant used a twenty-six exposure color disposable camera to photograph what he/she felt expressing his/her home life with a written caption for each photograph. As a result, photographs taken by 40 participants become key evidences providing an insight into home environment and family life in urban Bangkok (fig. 1).



**Figure 1: Selected photographs from *Bangkok Home Lives Project*  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2009)**

The reality of domesticity has been captured in these photographs. They are quite unlike the representations that we use to see. These photographs reflect not only the home life experiences of the individuals but also reflect the diversity of domestic interior as it is lived. This ordinary run of things has been unexpressed in earlier academic studies. As evidences from the Bangkok Home Lives Project elucidate, the home in contemporary Thai society is a nodal point in whole series of polarities: journey-arrival; rest-motion; sanctuary-outside; family-community; space-place; inside-outside; private-public; domestic-social; sparetime-worktime; feminine-masculine; heart-mind; being-becoming. These are not stable categories. However, what captures in photography is a freezing image of a moment in time. One needs to look at a series of homelife photographs in order to grasp the idea of what home means to the individual. So in the end, spatiality of the home and spatial experience of the home cannot yet be fully perceived through these photographs. What could be interesting is to use this photographic based research as a starting point for pushing the limit of academic studies on domesticity. Documenting the lived domestic space in the ways that it could reveal the spatiality of home can be a challenging task.

## Spatial experiences: Experiencing the home via film

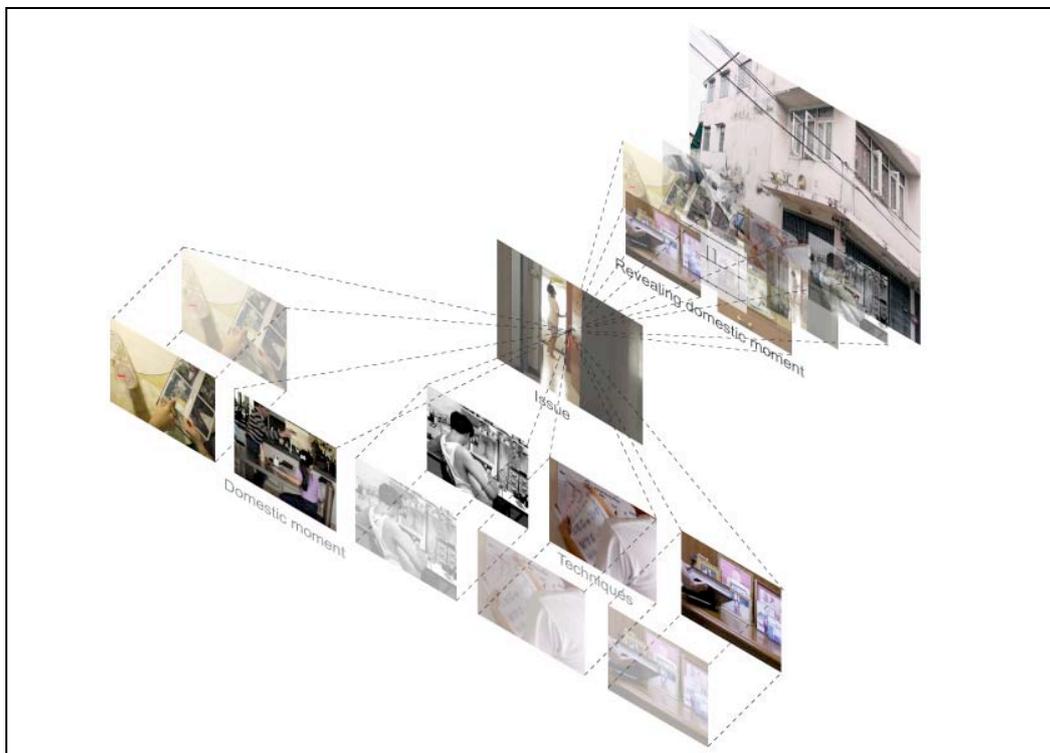
*If as an architect I relate SPACE to a measurement in metres, I can find out that a given room is four by five by three metres, for example. But that doesn't mean anything in relation to the quality of SPATIALITY. It just gives a mathematic definition.*

*Standard architectonic LOGIC describes SPACE as envelope. But this is nothing more than a material delimitation of space. To have a real SPATIALITY, one needs a black-hole LOGIC, so concentrated and multidimensional that its energetic power consumes itself to offer an unimaginable space-dimensionality.' (Schöning, 2005, p.13)*

Education in design studio can be more than designing building and/or interior space. In a conventional interior architectural design class, interior enclosure/interior space tends to be considered static and immobile. In contrary, spatial experience is more of movement when one uses or occupies such enclosure. The use of film in this interior architectural design studio takes on a challenge to document a 'domestic moment' captured from spatial experience of the homelife in order to introduce a concept for analysis and critique on the

contemporary domestic interiors in Bangkok. Film, as a medium and/or a technique, is to be used to elucidate spatial experience and to design the ways of capturing how people occupy space. Both spatial analysis and films, which students explored during the sixteen weeks, demonstrate certain values towards home and convey the critiques of home to viewers.

The studio begins by exploring what can film techniques communicate that drawings and models cannot. Similar to photography, what captures in drawings is a freezing image of a moment in time. In a common view, film helps simulating space and capturing spatial experience in the architecture and design fields. In this design studio, what film technique allows students to do is capturing movement and change in time. Images are multiplied and translated into spatial experience through film. For the sixteen weeks, studio is divided into two parts: (1) Domestic moments and (2) Revealing domestic moments (fig.2).

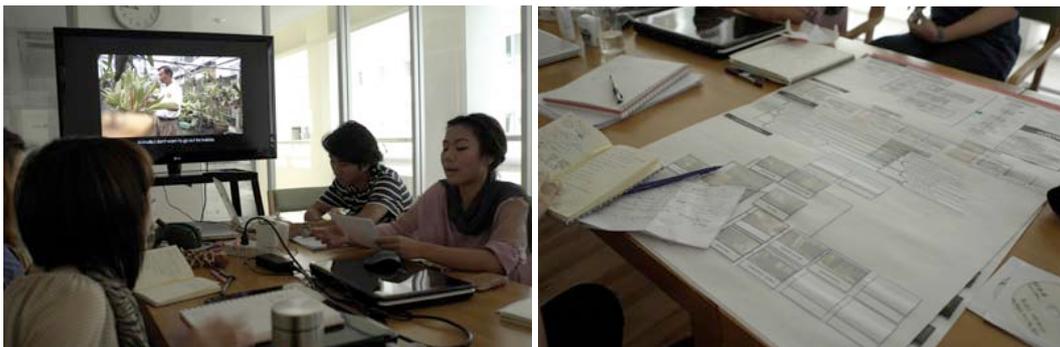


**Figure 2: A process of *Rethinking Bangkok Domesticity* design studio**  
**A student develops both domestic moment and explores film techniques to elucidate such domestic moment. With a clearer issue of the domestic moment, student then explores his spatial experience of home.**  
**(Source: Rongronglarp and Karnchanaporn, 2011)**

Domestic moments (six weeks): this first part of the studio asks students to focus on developing understanding of their ‘domestic moment’– life inside their home through the use of film techniques. Students are required to submit one short film each week (five films in total) to explore what parts of home contribute to their domestic moments and to make clear their issue of interest. In making the short film, students respond to a series of questions: How much home do one need to make it at home?, What can film techniques give you that drawing techniques cannot give?, What do you know about your domestic moment now that you did not know before?

Revealing domestic moments (ten weeks): following the first six weeks of working with constructing the issue of home and exploring how film techniques could help elaborating such issue, the second stage of the project asks students to go into greater depth, revealing their reasoning and interest behind their choice of 'domestic moment.' This investigation continues to be communicated through film. During tutorials, students debate the issue of their interest in attempt to deepen understanding of their domestic moment and its spatiality. The final short film is a single viewing experience and lasts between 15-30 minutes. This final short film functions as a debating point on the issue of home among the urban Thais.

As part of the interior architectural design class, students are encourage to consider any kind of visual material that could help them gaining insights into their choices of domestic moment. A series of sketches to elucidate the idea, a storyboard to show an overall structure, advertisements from real estate developers if they are relevant for comparison, any inspirational material such as texts and images, and interviews of people regarding the issue of home (fig.3). As film can be new to several students, practicing the use of camera movement and basic movie editing techniques are also part of the tutorials. Camera movements contribute significantly to the ways in which spatial experience is offered in the film.



**3A**  
**3B**  
**Figure 3: (3A) During tutorial sessions, students debate their issue of domestic moment through a series of clips they capture during the week. (3B) A storyboard to show the ways in which Chomnaphas Thongsri unfolds her spatial experience of the home. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)**

## Eleven short films that portray contemporary Thai domestic interiors

The first short film, by **Phuangphaka Sirisuttivoranun**, brings up Korean drama series as references to reflect domestic moment. By juxtaposing scenes from the Korean drama with her home life, this short film then blurs the boundary between the fake and the real domestic moment through conversations, arguments, and activities among family members. The movie addresses parallel images shifting between real activities and the ones from Korean series as if they were living together under the same house.

The second film, by **Sittipat Rongronglarp** is titled What's change? It documents changes in a row-house and family history in relation to the issue of privacy. From old photographs tinted with memory to stories told by relatives, the film reveals changes in privacy in both

physical domestic space and subjective way. Old row-house is a place where functions and programs are vaguely defined, some are blended but some are isolated. Space in a row-house is transformable to respond to the varieties of dweller. Home is a house with a family history. People change in age, in status, in demanding of private space within a house from the past, leading to a transformation of space that shifts function to suit its dweller (fig.4).



**Figure 4: A still image captured from *What's change?* (Source: Rongronglarp, 2011)**

The third film, by **Tachapim Charoenwaravit**, elucidates that home is the only place to offer a sense of release. At home, we remove all covers and return to the simplest mode of life. Home permits us to be honest with ourselves. Charoenwaravit's home is both home and office. The house is used as an office during the day and home emerges as the office life gradually ends. Not only residents can be released but home is also released from its duty.

The fourth film, by **Chomnaphas Thongsri**, her film reveals domesticity as fleeting moments of family's ancestors and memories (fig.5). The image of the grandfather and daily ancestral worship juxtaposed with collected objects from daily lives are reminders of what home is. These images and objects would be given to her as part of the family's inheritance. They are almost the symbol of home and family. These memories provide her with a means of identifying future.



**Figure 5: A still image captured from Chomnaphas Thongsri's short film (Source: Thongsri, 2011)**

The fifth set of short film, consisted of two films, addresses the issue of house as a place of individuality and a place of isolation. **Suppaporn Tantivasin** asks '*Can home be anywhere?*' For him, he is delighted to be home even though different activities and personal spaces

made family members use space separately (fig.6). In Tantivasin's perspective, home can be anywhere no matter where you are. Family gathering such as traveling, shopping, or doing any activity together defines what home is. **Nuttapong Pongmitree** portrays his house as a place of isolation. Busy working parents rarely spend time together, television becomes the only friend that he has. Different from common view that home is the place where family members return at the end of the day to be together, Pongmitree's trendy designed house is always empty.



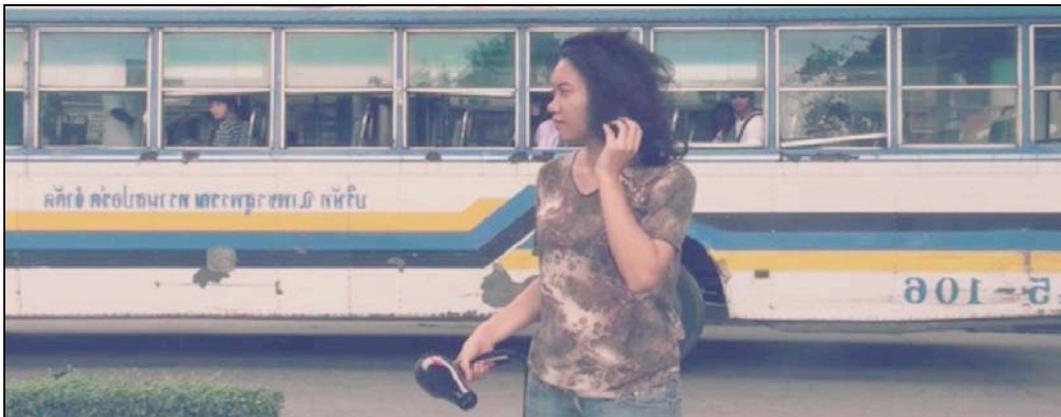
**Figure 6: A still image captured from Suppaporn Tantivasin's short film (Source: Tantivasin, 2011)**

The sixth set, two short films, offers a more emotional value of home as a place of love and care. Through the use of shared space, home is then constructed. **Chalitda Torsutkanok** was realised for the first time that she missed her home and set the film to show what part of home contribute to the felling of homesickness. The ground floor of the family's row-house is significant to the felling of belongings. When a long day is over, family members return home, the ground floor welcomes the returned members, one by one. It is where family members share daily experiences together (fig.7). Common as it may seem, this is the place where she misses the most. **Chichanupong Chucherdratana** demonstrates how the use of space has a great influence on relationship. At his home, family members prefer to share one room, the parents' bedroom to eat, rest and study while other rooms such as dining room is left unused. Surrounded by family members, it gives Chucherdratana a sense of love and care. With the limitation of space as well as the easy-going lifestyle such as having dinner in bedroom or sleeping in the same room with parents have significantly increased an intimacy among his family members.



**Figure 7: A still image captured from Chalitda Torsutkanok's short film (Source: Torsutkanok, 2011)**

The last set of film departs the reality of home life. Three films present the home as a place of imagination and a place of ambiguity between what is real and what is imagined. **Ploysira Sirasoontorn** has moved to an apartment to live on her own. In making her new home, the film shows how she projects the sense of home to collection of personal belongings and objects that trigger memories from the past. Emergence of flashback and surrealistic experience of one's previous place can link to the new place. For Sirasoontorn, home is a place that fills with childhood memories. Through collected objects, home is a place that always make you become a kid again. **Thanada Niyomvong** presents the ambiguity of familiar space of home versus the uncanny experiences. Darkness turns familiar space into unfamiliar one. With gruesome ghost stories, common in Thai culture, often told among family members, they influence the way she experiences her home at night. **Chantika Chomchome** dwells on her own individuality. She has her own little house nearby her parents. There is no need to share and the place gives her an absolute solitude to which she loves. Sleeping in other beds has never given her the same relaxation. Showering in other bathrooms has also never given her the same feeling as my home. Home becomes a place of misplacement and displacement for her (fig.8). At home, she drifts through the interplay between what is real and what is abstract.



**Figure 8: A still image captured from Chantika Chomchome's short film (Source: Chomchome, 2011)**

## The dialogue between film and critical design thinking

*Cinematic architecture confronts the stable with the temporal. It aims to dissolve or expose the concept of static material world through a buzz of constant change. The user of cinematic architecture, at its most extreme, will lose any consciousness of being housed or, the opposite, have the somewhat disappointing experience of there not being more than a house. In this way, cinematic architecture is a form of physical dialogue. And like any dialogue it should lead to a higher level of knowledge and understanding. (Schöning, 2005, p.22)*

Film is art. However, while using film as a technique, the studio does not commit fully to the artistic approach of film. At the end of sixteen weeks, students are not making art films. Constructing a dialogue between film and spatial study helps widen the perspective of spatial experience especially in the study of the place we think we know best about it. The design tasks of this studio are to design the ways to unfold moving images to communicate one's specific domestic moment. The cinematic narratives are based on spatiality of home through architectural spaces, thoughts, feelings and what can be perceived when we are at home. In each film, the issue of home is projected onto a two dimensional screen, collapsing space and time inside a frame. Issues of space and time is clearly not linear or consistence rendering complexity to the spatial experience.

Film helps students to develop critical design thinking that is extra to conventional interior architectural design classes. Although film techniques are new to most of students, they carefully create compositions that reflected meaningful aspects of the domesticity. Students learn to remove images and/or techniques that have no meaningful connection with their issues of domesticity. They also learn to create shot compositions that visually emphasized significant details as well as its core idea. No matter how compelling the images might be, the films can truly connect with audience when they express the filmmaker's vision of the story, in the case of this studio: a specific point of the domestic moment.

From the eleven short films, home is portrayed as both a space we inhabit and a place where we imagine. When we say that 'homes are made' rather than built, we acknowledge an interweaving personal imagination, lived relationships and shaped surroundings. Homes are made from material, social and cultural resources and are bound up in the relationships, which sustain those resources. In a sense, home does not always have to be a building. Spatial experience of the home can be justified if it registers all the mental, sensual and physical faculties that are engaged in a particular space at a particular time. Not surprisingly, home is an elusive subject to study. It is something about which nearly everyone feels confident to speak, and yet there is which, in the ordinary run of things, remains unexpressed.

The critical part of the work is when the specific domestic moment evolves in the film as a critique on urban domesticity. During the weekly tutorials, making a critique is not always imposed as negative judgement on the urban domesticity but it is also a way to recognise the ubiquitous qualities of home in urban society. It is an advantage beyond the sound, motion and color. In addition, films also add up a higher degree of involvement from the audiences than possible with drawings or models. Most students agree that these domestic moments developed in films are not new but, for the first time, these domestic moments are made intelligible. The eleven short films range from the poetic to the surreal, from the rational to the documentary. What all these 11 films communicate is dynamic instead of static. Each film has a strong critiquing point and contributes significantly on the studies of contemporary domesticity. These short films become a diverse set of intellectual journey as much as they are the scenes of the everyday life.

## Acknowledgement

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The studio consisted of eleven students: Chalitda Torsutkanok, Chantika Chomchome, Chichanupong Chucherdtrana, Chomnaphas Thongsri, Nuttapong Pongmitree, Ploysira Sirasontorn, Phuangphaka Sirisuttivoranun, Sittipat Rongronglarp, Suppaporn Tantivasin, Tachapim Charoenwaravit and Thanada Niyomvong.

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