

## RESEARCHING ON THE ‘EVERYDAY’ DOMESTICITY FIGURING OUT (DIFFERENT) WAYS TO USE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN SPATIAL RESEARCH

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Conducting two researches on the ‘everyday’ domesticity in the urban context of Bangkok, the author intends to unfold materials that would elucidate the ways in which social changes are embedded in the urban homelife and the domestic space. The goal of using ethnographic research methodology in the two researches is to learn from inhabitants’ experiences of buildings, to make the spatial experience of ‘living’ intelligible as much as to propose ways of improving the design of future buildings for inhabitants. In parallel to these ‘formal’ ethnographical research materials, the researches also generate two sets of interesting ‘informal’ research materials: (1) *Bangkok Home Lives Project* and (2) *Rethinking Domesticity*. The two informal materials are cultural studies as much as spatial analysis that critique on the existing contemporary domesticity including spatial, experiential and perceptive qualities. The questions are, if we are to stretch the limit of research materials believing that doing research is the approximate and dynamic procedure by which multiple curiosities build towards unexpected consequences, then in what way could we connect these seemingly informal research materials? And how do we make these materials valid and intelligible in the field of architectural research?

**Keywords:** Domesticity, Bangkok homelife, Thai domestic interior.

### Introduction

Researching is one of the most common acts of academic activities and academic careers. In architectural and design schools, we, as lecturers and design tutors, seem to be at some stage of research. Where the area of architectural and spatial researches falls into the framework of social sciences and humanities, the suggested primary research methodology is ethnography. Employing ethnographic research method requires the deep and comprehensive study of a particular culture. Ethnographic research method is considered a qualitative research method aimed at exploring cultural phenomena and ordinary activities. The method is to help describing as precisely as possible the studied phenomena (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Empirical data collection involves the study of group and people as they go about their everyday lives, and trying to identify the subjective meaning people attribute to things or event as much as looking at the objective characteristic of such events.

The use of ethnographic research method in architectural researches, domestic interiors in this case, could be a lighter version of ethnography. Domesticity can be considered a socio-cultural phenomenon as much as a theoretical perspective on the ways in which space of home (domestic interior) is portrayed. The idea of house/home has developed from the philosophical perspective on the origin of architecture to the anthropological traces of tribal homestead and towards domesticity of the seventeenth-century urbanity (figure 1).

Domesticity is understood to be one of the principal achievements of the Bourgeois Age that the appearance of intimacy and privacy in homes especially in Paris and London has been studied as reaction to the changing conditions of urban life (Lukacs, 1970 and Rybczynski, 1987). Driven by changing society and economy towards urbanity, domesticity evolves around family structure, home economies/family incomes, identity, intimacy, meaningful home objects and also the role of woman and her devotion to the home (Weinthal, 2011). Interior has become a setting for domestic activities where the rooms and the objects that they contained acquired a life of their own and existed in the imagination of their owners (Weinthal, 2011). The domesticity in physical and atmospherical sense could be described with reference to the households of the Dutch middle-class. Through the miniature dollhouse-like model commissioned by Dutch middle-class householders and the paintings by Dutch artists Emanuel de Witte (*Interior with a Woman Playing a Virginal*, 1660) and Jan Vermeer (*The Love Letter*, 1666), domesticity comes into being (Rybczynski, 1987).



**Figure 1.** The personification of architecture and the primitive hut, after Laugier (Source: Rykwert, 1981); Plan and sectional elevation of a Matakam homestead in Cameroon showing rooms with different functions for dwelling (Source: Plie, 2009); and a section through a Paris flat in 1852 revealing differences in class and lifestyle (Source: Muthesius, 2009).

Evidently, miniature dollhouse-like models of the Dutch middle-class homes and the Dutch paintings that reveal the essence of domestic interior have brought the idea of domesticity to light (Rybczynski, 1987). They express insightful traces of life beyond the physical aspects of the house. These evidences have been analyzed almost like empirical data on human society and culture in the ethnographic research. They provide relevant details that can be described hence capturing the theoretical perspective the changing role of house/home: from the theoretical take on the origin of architecture to the philosophical interpretation of dwelling and to the emergence of domesticity.

### Researching on Bangkok Domesticity

Conducting two researches on the 'everyday' domesticity in the urban context of Bangkok, the researcher/author intend to unfold materials that would elucidate the ways in which social changes are embedded in the urban homelife and the domestic space. The two researches are undertaken by ethnographic research methodology when collecting data: (1) surveys of houses and homes using photographic documentations both taken by the researcher and by the inhabitants, (2) semi-structured interviews of inhabitants and (3) participant observation.

Research materials include floor plans of the house and apartment (Figure 2), details of objects that furnished those rooms, the ways rooms and objects were depicted, the manner in which people used them, and how they thought about them. Photographic documentation by the researcher, which some photographs are included in this paper, is used to elucidate the condition of living in these apartments (Figure 3). Respondents include owners (parents) and other family members (children and relatives). Although the research is an architectural study, the interdisciplinary research approach provides more alternatives with which to collect and view data (Kent, 1990). The goal of conducting social and cultural architecture researches like these two researches is to learn from inhabitants' experiences of buildings, to make the spatial experience of 'living' intelligible as much as to propose ways of improving the design of future buildings for inhabitants.



**Figure 2.** Data collection: Floor plans indicating furniture arrangement of three different apartment units (floor area of 45 square meters) in the Royal Thai Navy flat, Bangkok. From left to right: (2.1) An empty apartment unit, (2.2) an apartment unit for an extended family of 4 members, (2.3) an apartment unit for a single family of 4 members with front area designated for food preparation as the mother works as food vendor, and (2.4) an apartment unit for a single family of 4 members. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011).



**Figure 3.** Data collection: Photographic documentations of the apartment units showing the use of furniture such as a closet, a bookcase and an entertainment cabinet as a space divider in the two apartment units. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011).

The analyses on Bangkok domesticity are based on empirical materials. From the researches, the survey materials present insights of the way people live in the urban area of Bangkok. The research materials elucidate relationship between houses/apartments and surrounding, owner and his/her family, how they inhabit the space and how they divide or share space, what function in the physical sense, spiritual sense and etc. The essence of social relevance, however, always lies on the framework to which these living conditions are looked at. Evidences from the researches are thus the representation of paradox of living in Bangkok.

### Photography and Film as (Re)search Techniques

In parallel to these ‘formal’ ethnographical research materials, the researches also generate two sets of interesting ‘informal’ research materials: (1) *Bangkok Home Lives Project*, a photographic documentation taken by each inhabitant with the given 24 exposure-disposable camera in responding to the question ‘What does home mean to you?’ and (2) *Rethinking Domesticity*, eleven short films as the outcome from the Interior Architectural Design Studio, undergraduate level at the School of Architecture and Design (King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand), that investigates urban domesticity through students’ own homes with the use of film techniques. On the methodological level, these informal research materials: photographs from disposable cameras and short films from Interior Architectural Design Course, contribute to the direction of research analysis for both researches. These informal research materials are cultural studies as much as spatial analysis that critique on the existing contemporary domesticity including spatial, experiential and perceptive qualities.

#### *Bangkok Home Lives*

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 (figure 4 to 7).



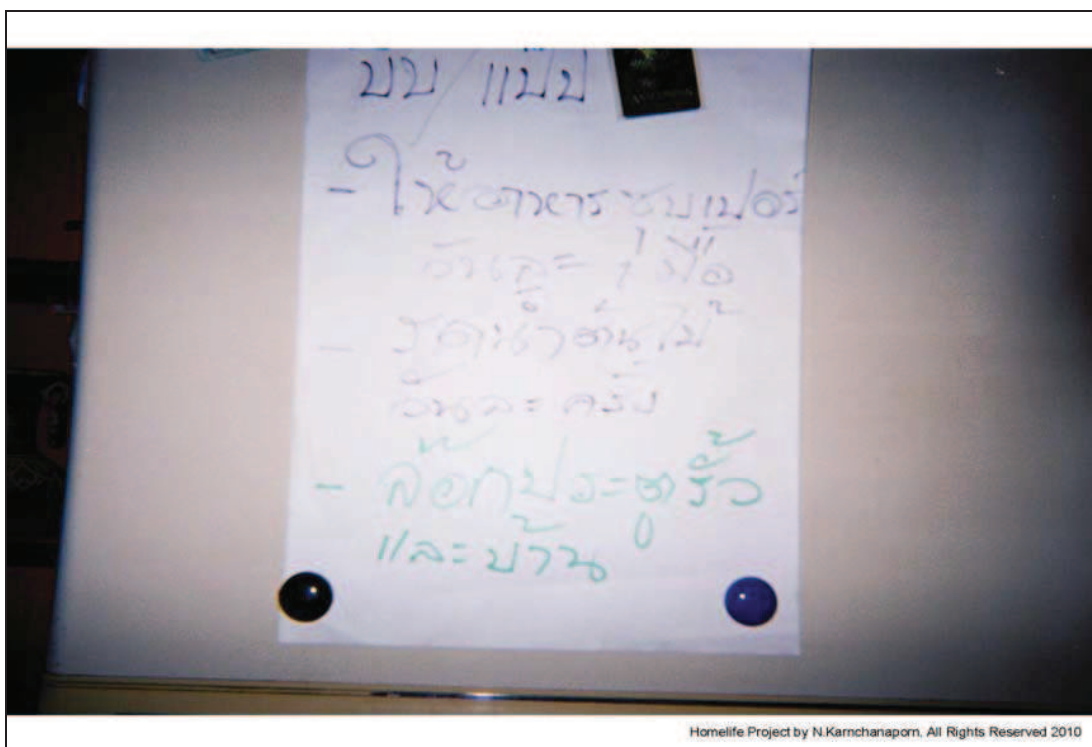
**Figure 4.** Selected photographs from Bangkok Home Lives Project.  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2009).



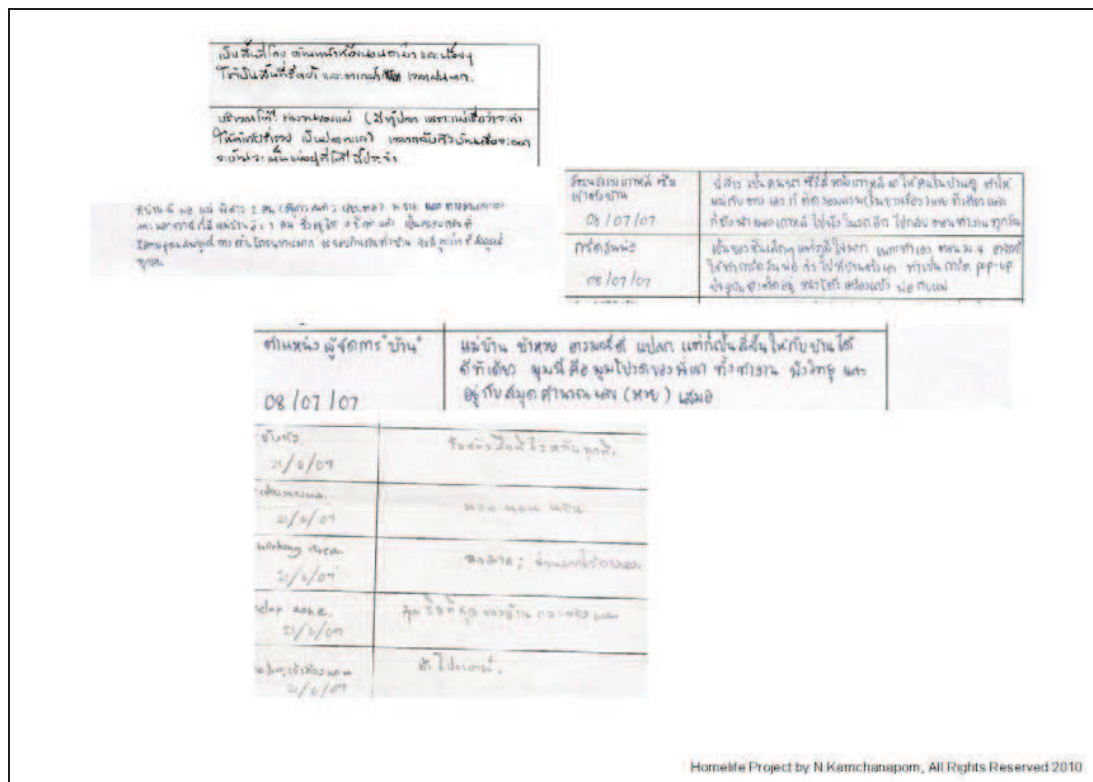
**Figure 5.** Selected photographs from Bangkok Home Lives Project: A Family house in a housing estate.  
(Source: Lumthaweepaisal and Karnchanaporn, 2009).



**Figure 6.** A selected photograph from Bangkok Home Lives Project: A townhouse in a housing estate. (Source: Srisaowanunt and Karnchanaporn, 2009).



**Figure 7.** A selected photograph from Bangkok Home Lives Project: A family house in a housing estate. (Source: Thanawongrat and Karnchanaporn, 2009).



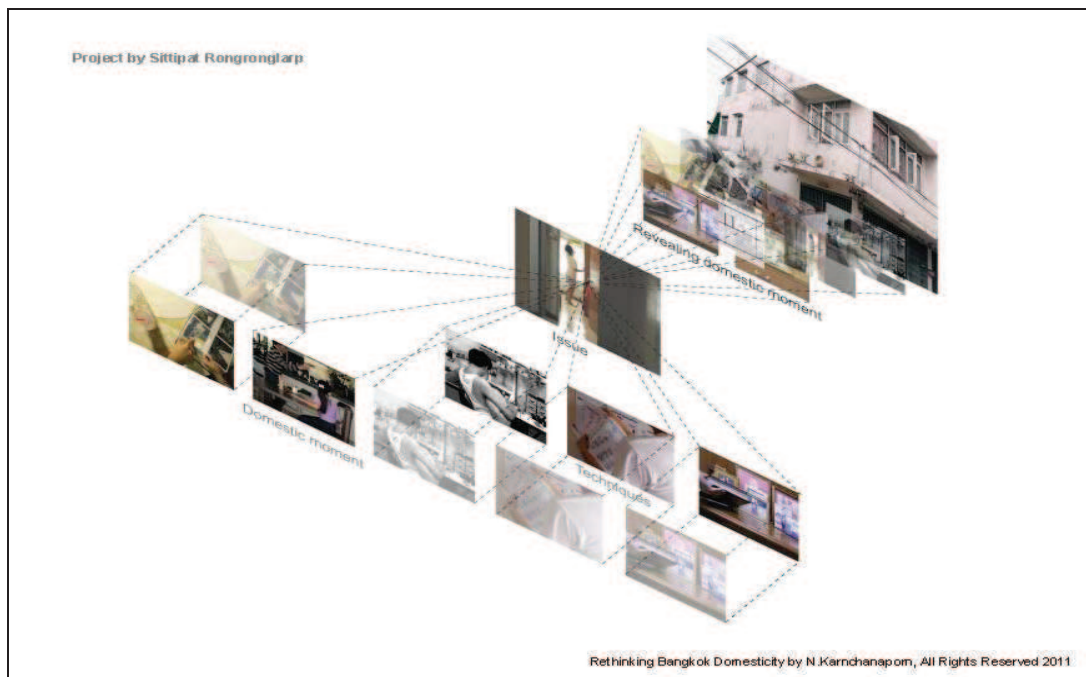
**Figure 8.** Captions of photographs are also written by the participants.  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2009)

### *Rethinking Domesticity*

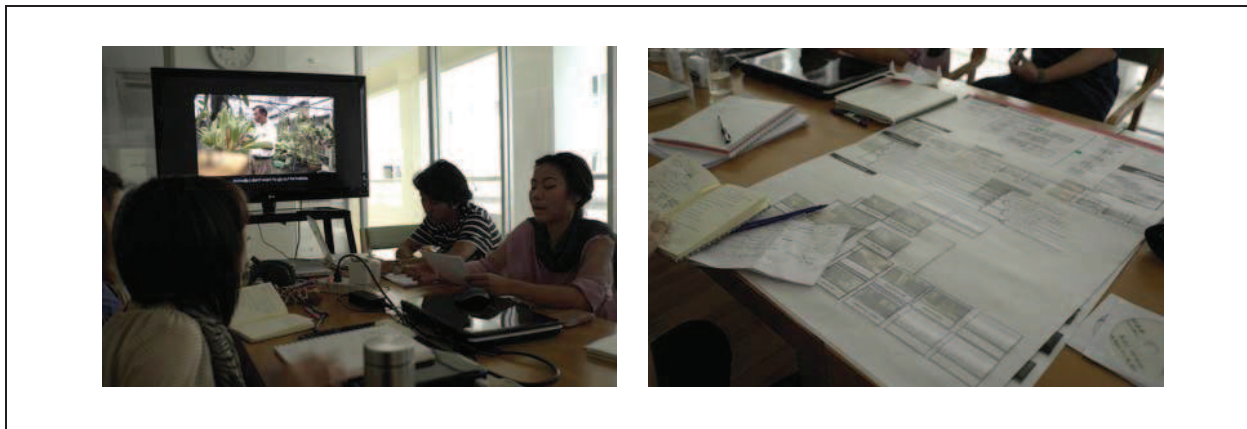
*Rethinking Domesticity* is the work from the Interior Architectural Design Studio at School of Architecture and Design (KMUTT). The studio investigates the lived and the ideal home in Bangkok through the use of film techniques. The tasks are research based ones as much as to explore different design approach. Students address their critiques of contemporary domesticity through 11 individual films based on their homes (Karnchanaporn, 2012). Part cultural study, part spatial analysis, part artistic approach, each film reveals domestic 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. These films uncover the hidden meaning of the place we call home.

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 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 (figure 9 and 10).





**Figure 9.** 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).



**Figure 10.** (10-Left) During tutorial sessions, students debate their issue of domestic moment through a series of clips they capture during the week. (10-Right) A storyboard to show the ways in which Chomnaphas Thongsri unfolds her spatial experience of the home.

(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

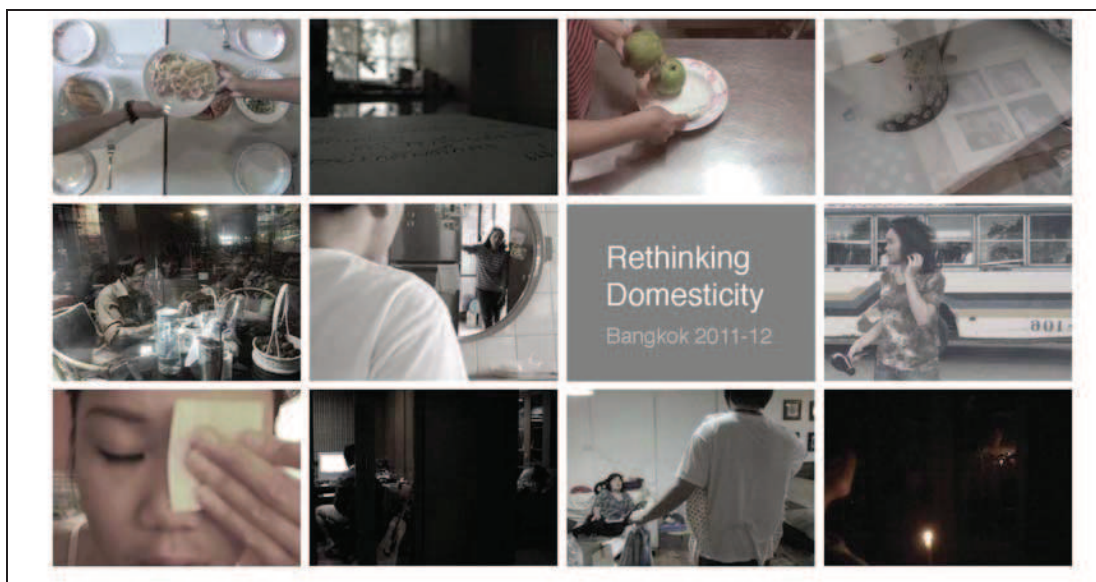
Similar to photography, what captures in drawings is a freezing image of a moment in time. In a common view, film helps simulating space and capturing spatial experience in the architecture and design fields. In this design studio, what film technique allows students to do is capturing movement and change in time (Figure 11). Images are multiplied and translated into spatial experience through film. 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? 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.



**Figure 11.** A storyboard and a timeline to show the ways in which Sittipat Rongronglarp unfolds his spatial experience of the shop-house. (Source: Rongronglarp, 2011).



**Figure 12.** The eleven short films range from the poetic to the surreal, from the rational to the documentary. 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. (Source: Rethinking Domesticity Studio, 2011).

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 (Figure 12).

### To Share and to Discuss

The researches started with formal but a lighter version of ethnography, and then emerged with informal materials that honestly portray the studied conditions. The researcher/author finds such materials have potentials in conveying the studied conditions.

***For the photographs from disposable camera taken by homeowners:*** the reality of domestic lives 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 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 the taken 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.

***Short films from the Interior Architectural Design Class:*** from the eleven short films done by students in the Interior Architectural Design course, 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.

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 judgment on the urban domesticity but it is also a way to recognize 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.

*"Interior design literature is in need of theoretical framing...Architectural theory identifies major themes and ideas in the history of architecture, but an equivalent framework for interiors-one that references design history and simultaneously builds upon its interdisciplinary relationships-is missing and needs to be written."* (Weinthal, 2011)

The questions are, if we are to stretch the limit of research materials believing that doing research is the approximate and dynamic procedure by which multiple curiosities build towards unexpected consequences, then in what way we could connect these seemingly informal research materials? and how to make these materials valid and intelligible in the field of architectural research? As suggested, research is systematic inquiry directed toward the creation of knowledge in the ways that: *"There is a conscious demarcation of how particular information is culled from the rest of our experience, how it is categorized, analyzed, and presented."*; and *"New knowledge can also be emerge in relatively small increments and be attained through a variety of means."* (Groat and Wang, 2002) Apart from gaining insights into Bangkok domesticity what lies ahead would be how to make these materials reflect theoretical perspective and valid as references in design study.

***Categorized, analyzed, and presented:*** Based on ethnographic research materials collected by the researcher: (1) surveys of houses and homes using photographic documentations taken by the researcher and recorded floor plans, (2) semi-structured interviews of inhabitants and (3) participant observation, domesticity is clearly contextual. In both researches, domesticity is driven significantly by economy of Bangkok Urbanity and cultural attitude of Thai householders towards family structure and gender. Theoretical and contextual frameworks for analyzing research materials could begin from there, so relevant social issues of domesticity can be addressed.

***Attaining new knowledge:*** Unlike observation done in architectural studies, i.e., observing from the outside and recording from the point of view of the person who records the information, study of the domestic interior requires experience of the home from the point of view of inhabitant with little to no pre-conception given by researcher. In this sense, the researches succeeded in opening up for two sets of informal and personal materials (*Home Lives Project* photographs and *Rethinking Domesticity* short films) that present honest domestic life, of home as inhabited from householders. The series of photograph from disposable cameras and the short films addressing personal domestic moments are evidences that Bangkok domesticity deals with material objects and space on the everyday life as much as it gives away emotional resonance of homelife. Cultural attitude of Thai householders is reflected through photographs and films as if they are self-portraits of the person who made them. These materials unfold home-based desires, imaginings and aspirations, privacy and intimacy that inform the cultural and social aspects of domesticity.

In conclusion, both formal and informal research materials elucidate that domesticity is not an area where analysis could be done by observing from the outside. In the study of Bangkok domesticity, empirical data from ethnographic research materials is complemented by informal research materials, which afford us insights into the homes of particular social categories and individuals. Coupling with theoretical analysis on interior economy, new knowledge of Bangkok domesticity could emerge.



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