

# FLAT-SWAP: A CRITICAL SURVEY OF HIGH DENSITY DWELLING IN GLASGOW AND SINGAPORE

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the impact of contextual matters on the production of design and outlines challenges facing a distributed design studio model. By describing contextual difference as well as similarity, it offers some insights into how communication around the development of a response to context is undertaken and seeks to understand how it might be enhanced.

**Keywords:** Glasgow, Singapore, Interior Design, collaboration, pop-up, CoLab, pedagogy, critical-surveying, design-over-distance, telematic, tenement, HDB

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2011 Glasgow School of Art (GSA)<sup>4</sup> in partnership with Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), established GSA Singapore. The primary business of this collaboration was to deliver the final two years of honours degree programmes in Interior Design and Communication Design aimed at Diploma students in that country, providing those individuals with the opportunity to top-up their existing awards at a globally recognised School of Art with internationally acknowledged expertise in creative education. The ambition of the partnership was to produce high quality graduates equipped to enter the existing and shape the nascent design ecosystems of South East Asia and beyond. Some of the key challenges facing any partnership of this nature include: how to build connections between geographically remote communities of scholars; how to foster a sense of belonging within a Distributed Academy<sup>5</sup> across the component parts of such an institutional model; and how to engage in a direct, relevant and profound way with high-contrast contextual matters – be those socio-economic, cultural, topographic, urban, climatic or indeed pedagogical. From this particular vantage point, with a studio spanning opposite sides of the world, between Northwestern Europe and Southeastern Asia, such contrasts and connections are ripe for exploration.

One of the ways this bridging is currently undertaken in a real-world sense, is via an SIT originated innovation. This stipulates that all students enrolled on their partnership

programmes are required to participate in an activity called the Overseas Immersion Programme (OIP). In the case of GSA Interior Design this takes the form of the entire Singapore based cohort of circa 50 students accompanied by staff, coming to Glasgow for 3 weeks around the time of the Schools Degree Show. During this time they engage in a studio based project, ordinarily examining the built environment of the city, where they are accompanied by their Student Ambassadors drawn from the same year group, Glasgow side. Students convene in studio, and participate in studio and project based work in the contextual locale of the partner institution. This aptly named immersion has the effect of deeply connecting the students to the concepts and values of the 'place' in which they are studying and was considered worth building upon.

To this end the broad staff team sought to devise a project which would attempt to link students at the start of their Level 3, in order that awareness of context be more usefully embedded across both sites and that both groups of students might better develop academic and future international professional relationships over a longer chunk of the comparatively short period of time that they are studying together. This would be done via a specific project that would require students to make use of our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as a repository for work produced and as a notice-board for sharing ideas.

## 2. THE BRIEF

At the start of Academic Session 2015/16 we created a pilot project that would introduce the process of identifying appropriate methods of communication of Studio output and discussion over distance. A project which would direct its gaze towards the specifics of each place, with the implicit obligation on participants to share as much as possible about that place, with another place. The filter for this dialogue was the vernacular dwelling spaces most abundantly found in each city. In Glasgow – tenement housing, in Singapore – HDB apartment blocks.

Students, with staff acting as collaborators as well as mentors, were encouraged to forensically probe the breadth and diversity of each type of residential space as deeply as possible. Emphasis was placed on gathering observations and speculations on inhabitation, personalisation and patterns of occupation, as well as more directly designed aesthetic, functional and decorative matters. Students were primed through workshops, presentations and visits, to develop 'appropriate ways for critically addressing the design heritage of the place where (they) learn, in ways that encourage deep engagement, rather than superficial sampling'. This in part involved the augmentation of conventional interior design strategies with those borrowed from other fields. The output, artefacts and discussion this generated would subsequently be exchanged via the VLE. Participants were clear about the prioritisation of the sanctioned communication from the start of the process, and were also aware that even though the building types were contrasting and separated by time and distance, in essence the domestic dramas they contain exhibit many similarities. What was being sought was a record of both soft and hard inhabitation and how this contrasted or harmonised within each setting.

### 3. SITE(S)

#### Glasgow (Tenement)

In Glasgow students undertaking the project looked at primarily 19<sup>th</sup> C sandstone tenement constructions, within which typically eight flats occupy a single building, sharing a common staircase or 'Close'. The cohort was split into 4 groups with staff ascertaining how many students were either living in, or had contact with tenement flats, in some instances working in shops or bars located in such buildings. This allowed a breadth of exposure to many of the cities historic late victorian neighborhoods, as well as general access to the full range of type, quality of finish and decoration present within those spaces.

Tenements are distributed evenly throughout the city, though they are clustered intact, in the familiar gridded arrangement, across the west-end in Woodlands, Finnieston, Hyndland and Partick; the southside in Shawlands, Pollokshields, Queens Park, Crosshill and Mount Florida; the east-end in Dennistoun and Tollcross; and in Garnethill itself.<sup>6</sup> In these communities the tenement acts as a defining element within the urban realm where they are often linked via public spaces and parkland. As well as containing residential space, they also house shops, offices, clinical spaces, pubs, hairdressers/barbers and even third sector or charity space, with retail and recreational spaces predominantly located on the ground floor, and clinical spaces, such as dentists, or doctors surgeries predominantly located on the first floor.

As source material for interior designers these buildings are ideal. Their external form is, on the surface at least, relatively uniform, massive and modest. Once across the threshold of the close however, the contrast is palpable. Here, especially in the public stairwells, are revealed often highly decorated circulation spaces containing painted, coloured, stained and etched glass, with both organic and geometric abstract motifs; press-moulded, brightly glazed ceramic tiles festooned in flowers, and birds; uniquely formed cast-iron stair spindles; decorated door mouldings and elaborate timber work, saying nothing of the oculi, cupolas and complex sweeps and turns exhibited within the stairwells themselves, and the gilding, ornamental plasterwork in the form of cornicing, friezes and ceiling roses, decorated fanlights, filigree and fretwork of the apartments that visitors are swept towards.

To introduce some of this richness of historic subject matter staff from the Forum for Critical Inquiry at GSA presented the historical context for the growth of tenement living emerging from the massive population growth experienced during Glasgow's rapid industrialisation in the 19th century; how the proximity to production and a highly skilled manufacturing labour force, helped to establish the decorated tenement as the preferred city dwelling for the upper and middle class; and how in stark contrast, during Glasgow's brief but radical dalliance with radical modernist planning theories during the 1950's and 60's, entire tenement communities were entirely erased in those parts of the city defined variously as slums or in the parlance of the time, Comprehensive Development Areas (CDA's). The timeline opened student's eyes to the context and importance of this building type to its locale and how over time the relationship towards them has matured. Students were able to

visit the National Trust for Scotland's Tenement House in Garnethill, to experience a perfectly preserved middle class tenement from early 20th Century. This offered into how these buildings were configured prior to widespread electric lighting, and with solid fuels used in their kitchen stoves. Students began dissecting how their own accommodation had been redecorated, remodeled and repositioned.

#### Singapore (HDB)

The project in Singapore began with the division of the island into sections, north, south, centre, east, and west. This sectioning of the island is significant because, over the course of its 50 year statehood, Singapore has been developed gradually, starting centre-south, centre-south-west, and centre-south-east—then centre north—and east, then far west—and far north. Stylistically, each HDB estate is a sign of their own time, as each era is experimental with its building.

The staff team in Singapore chose estates built by the Housing Development Board only, this meant places like Tiong Bahru (a 1930's Streamlined Moderne estate now a designated Conservation Area), were excluded as they were technically built by the SIT (Singapore Improvement Trust). These selections were based on date of building – in order to achieve a broad selection of 1960's, 70's, 80's, 90's, 2000's and contemporary structures – and also on any particular standout features that may be exhibited – eg the Whampoa estate is the largest, continuous slab-block on the island. The range of estate types included point blocks, slab blocks with slanted roofs and some estates with 2-storey 'tenement' type apartments.

Estates were not assigned to particular students, rather the 12 areas researched by staff were presented to the student group, who were then asked if they had any connections to these sites— if they lived there or if they knew anyone who lived there, in order to obtain easy access to the interior. During this process some offered estates fell away, as no one had any ties to them, and some alternative ones were added, for the opposite reason. In the end 13 estates, covering the entire island were chosen. Each of these had an assigned group of students ranging from between 2-4 people.

The first task students were set was to record the site in its entirety as a group, to ascertain why the site is significant and what interesting facts might be reported back to Glasgow. This was considered to be an exploration of the fundamental components of the typical HDB model. The second part asked the students to record a certain aspect of the site that interested them personally at a much smaller, more intimate, more subjective scale. Outcomes from this ranged from interviews with residents in a block marked for demolition, to careful documentation of displays of private/public corridor collections, where the corridor becomes room to store everything from plants, to furniture, to second fridges etc

## 4. OUTPUT AND ARTEFACTS

Glasgow: Over the three weeks of the project GSA students in Garnethill produced diverse outputs from their exploration, mainly in the form of narrative models and maquettes but also including an embroidered banner which fused motifs from the Victorian era with social media 'like' symbols; several short films, a sound piece and some large format photo essays.

Students made extensive use of archival material in particular working drawings, to explore formal and decorative themes including framing, arrangement and massing; social and critical design including changing gender roles, aspects of the private and the public, loneliness and atmosphere. They looked at cooperation and conflict within the shelter and semi-private spaces of the close and re-imagined how tenement living might develop over the near future.

Singapore: The relatively short duration of the project meant that the majority of the projects were objective and documentary in nature, consisting in the main of photographic survey work. To date projects have been presented in book/journal format at A5 or A4, mostly photographs. The content of which is mainly of common areas, such as circulation spaces and what items the residents of the buildings store in these places. One particular group were asked to specifically document the Rochor Centre as it is due to be demolished in 2016 and perhaps as a result, that documentation was most potent. This group conducted interviews with some of the last remaining residents and business owners. The site is slowly emptying out which resulting in an inevitable 'frozen' framing of its previous uses. It is destined to become a highway, a detail that echoes similar tenement clearances in Glasgow in the late 1960's to prepare the route of the M8 motorway and Kingston Bridge.

Students in each base found it interesting to view these ubiquitous buildings with their peers in the opposite place in mind and used the opportunity to transform the otherwise mundane into the meaningful and the commonplace into the unique, providing their correspondents with insight into a place that – in the case of the Glasgow group – few, if any of them have visited, and in the case of the Singapore group – all of them will visit.

## 5. SHARING

Working with colleagues in Library and Learning Resources and Registry we set up a dedicated course on the VLE to facilitate the sharing of work between Glasgow and Singapore. This was done in preparation for the start of AS 15/16 and was intended to enable conversation between the two locations, with students using their research into the local housing stock as a point of exchange. They had three facilities available to do this, email, file share, and journal.<sup>7</sup> Students were encouraged to deposit archive data, to present findings in the Journal area for comment and to communicate via email within their respective groups.

Until the middle of week 2 of the project the cross campus interaction was minimal. Students from both Singapore and Glasgow had posted some initial information on their respective building types, however the posts were statements and did not appear to encourage engagement.

In an effort to counter this group discussions were held with staff where we discussed the need to ask questions, probe the reasons for their observations and open up students own postings to questions. The format of online conversations for this demographic ie predominately Generation-Z was assumed to be second nature, however it appeared that the

engagement with the interface of the VLE contrasted unfavourably with the ease of operation they enjoy with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms.

One group initiated a WhatsApp conversation, however this did not offer the place for them to open up dialogue beyond a couple of sentences. They understood the need to locate the conversations and information within the VLE in order for staff and fellow students to have neutral platform to engage, so they decided to screen-grab their conversations. This appeared to be a successful communication breakthrough with the app offering notifications when material was updated, a facility less clearly available on the VLE itself.

Once the groups appeared to break down some of their initial reservations and engaged in some cross-campus commentary via the Journal, the tone of the conversations were informal and chatty with observations of the building types, age, decay, weather etc. As demonstrated below with the members of Group A:

Singapore Student 1:

*"Hey! I love how the buildings there utilise natural materials like brick and stone because it shows the rawness and age of the building and it is preserved so well! It is very rare to see buildings in Singapore made out of bricks... because of efficiency, we want everything to be done quickly and cheaply... therefore buildings here can hardly be preserved because they crumble so fast!"*

Glasgow Student 1:

*"What a contrast... I feel like the way we inhabit our spaces must be so very different. Do you feel that the fact that these buildings were built "quickly and cheaply" changes the way you feel and actually live in the space? Would you find living in our older and more "natural" housing more personal? It's funny that you think that the buildings are preserved so well... a lot of tenements we visited are neglected (for example, my bathroom is rotting away because my landlord refuses to take care of it!). It's a shame that a lot of landlords seem to only care about rent and not about preserving our wonderful tenements... they can be incredibly beautiful when taken care of properly. The weather here also makes things difficult when it comes to building. As it rains a lot, it's common to find lots of problems with damp, rot and mould. Long story short, do you like living in your housing type and would you ever be tempted to live in ours? :)"*

Groups B & C demonstrated very little interaction between their postings, there were only a few comments in response to postings not leading to further discussion. Group D evidenced their interactions via screen grabs of the Whatsapp conversations, incorporating some photographic content. The initial flurry of activity with the second week then subsided as the student in both Glasgow and Singapore focused on the delivery of the individual conclusion to their research. The intention on completion of the 3 week project timeline was for each student to upload the output at the point of the concluding review, however without staff monitoring there has been little evidence of this.

## 6. CONCLUSION

With more guidance and coaching the VLE might have been used more effectively by students. Perhaps some clearer examples, more explanatory text, or a more considered introduction would have helped. It was anticipated at the outset of the project that the VLE might provide a less than ideal platform as it does not encourage creative engagement or time investment.

Some student feedback indicated that the shared information was denuded of personal investment, like a copy of 'a Google search'. Students may have self-imposed a neutral perspective on their uploads, when the aim was for there to be a cross campus conversation which had been anticipated would be layered with personal stories, peculiarities and localised perspectives, providing insights beyond the dry and factual. It might also be the quality and depth of sharing was irreparably inhibited by a top-down instruction to operate via a restricting format, that they had been directed to follow, rather than them shaping and evolving their own sharing forums and methods. Other issues that were encountered included students not fully considering the content produced for journal, which might be best remedied by offering a clearer introduction on how to use the content creation interface. It was also noted that users can respond with text in comments, in a visual studio situation this is a limitation. Sharing work across sites was further curtailed by the considerable obstacle that is differing time-zones (normally of 7 hours), or starting the day in the west as the day concludes in the east. This meant that, so far, we have been unable to establish live conversations, via Skype for example. Discussion was solely in the form of static comment.

The resistance to sharing online was surprising considering the age range of the participants and their intimate relationship with social media where they interact with ease. That said, there was no prior relation established between the two cohorts it is understandable that this was challenging in an inaugural and short duration project. It is recognised that it may take longer for students to develop the confidence to share. With the observations and insight gained by staff it would be pertinent to examine the potential of locating the project in the second half of Term 1, after establishing a gentle and informal online introduction of the groups (supervised by staff) that could build over the first half of Term 1.

Now that aspects of sharing have been established and tested and as both cohorts run parallel projects throughout the academic year, we have the opportunity to continue to develop the group interactions and observe how student engagement evolves and identify the means by which the VLE can be utilised in a more cohesive, intuitive and accessible way. It appears that staff intervention is required to steer and gently enthuse the students into the specific type of interaction that is critical, discursive and supportive.

Finally, as it is our ambition to conclude the Flat-Share Co-Lab with simultaneous capsule exhibition with events in both Singapore and Glasgow, we view this as the start rather than the end of the research. The exhibited work will include the body of material generated from both sites to be duplicated, shared and independently edited and presented each site. This will establish a Design Portal between two places, via which our collective enthusiasm for

urban exploration and critical-surveying will be channelled, highlighting a belief in the capability of interior design as a central device in the shaping of alternative futures for the cities we inhabit.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>GSA is one of a diminishing number of Art Schools that retains Independent status. It is a Small Specialist Institution (SSI) and is Studio and project centred.

<sup>5</sup> Currently the Distributed Academy comprises the School in Glasgow, GSA Singapore, and the Creative Campus in Forres in the Scottish Highlands.

<sup>6</sup> Garnethill is the site of Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art building, the main fulcrum of the School campus, which itself sits harmoniously within an urban village consisting of streets of tenement buildings, it filters and sculpts their materiality, atmosphere and presence into something quite unique.

<sup>7</sup> Journal is a VLE tool name, a linear way for groups of users to submit work for appraisal.