Linking the Past to the Present: Housing History and the Sense of Home in Temporary Public Rental Housing in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

The current literature on sense of home argues that security in housing tenure is necessary for people to feel ‘at home’ in their dwelling. In particular, the idea about housing security is framed using the notion of tenure longevity and this definition has been consistently reproduced or implied in recent studies investigating how people experience sense of home. While most studies in this scholarly space are taken from English-speaking, middle-class and high-income contexts, how low income households experience sense of home, particularly in developing countries where housing assistance is scarce, is still under-researched. Similarly, there is limited investigation of how the home is understood in housing situations where tenure longevity is uncertain.

This thesis contributes another view to this scholarly space, using the Sarawak context where public housing is intended solely for transitional purposes. The policy specifies six years of maximum tenancy, after which tenants are expected to exit public housing. This policy is not enforced and tenants may stay on after the maximum period. Such ambiguity in the public housing tenure affects tenants’ sense of home. Given this context, my thesis critically examines how current tenants of the Sarawak public housing experience a sense of home. I use the case study methodology to capture tenants’ lived experiences of home in their former housing and public housing, by employing in-depth interviews, observations and survey as data collection methods.

Despite the insecure tenure, most tenants regard public housing as their home. The findings demonstrate a strong association between housing history and a sense of home in public housing. The ways in which current tenants experience a sense of homeliness or unhomeliness in the facility are specifically shaped by their lived experiences of home in their former housing. This thesis highlights the significance of trade-offs that vulnerable households have to make in their housing decisions, in order to make a home in public housing. In addition, the critical examination of home in the context of this thesis has offered alternative ways to examine important concepts in the housing literature such as housing security and trade-offs in housing decision making.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface

Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

This is thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

Signed: Haslina Hashim

Date: 4th December 2017
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract \hspace{1cm} II  
declaration \hspace{1cm} III  
Acknowledgements \hspace{1cm} IV  
List of Figures \hspace{1cm} XI  
List of Tables \hspace{1cm} XII  

Chapter 1  
Introduction: The Past Matters in Producing Sense of Home in Public Housing  
1.1 Introduction \hspace{1cm} 1  
1.2 How the Low Income Live in Sarawak \hspace{1cm} 5  
1.3 Affordable Housing Programs in Malaysia  
\hspace{1cm} 1.3.1 Affordable homeownership programs \hspace{1cm} 10  
\hspace{1cm} 1.3.2 Public rental housing in Sarawak \hspace{1cm} 11  
1.4 How Does Public Rental Housing in Sarawak Compare to Other Countries? \hspace{1cm} 15  
1.5 Conclusions and the Structure of this Thesis \hspace{1cm} 17  

Chapter 2  
Literature Review: Housing History and Sense of Home  
2.1 Introduction \hspace{1cm} 20  
2.2 Housing Security and the Sense of Home \hspace{21cm} 21  
2.3 Housing History and the Sense of Home \hspace{1cm} 23  
2.4 Exploring Tenants’ Housing Options Using the Life-Course Approach to Housing Behaviour  
\hspace{1cm} 2.4.1 Housing needs and preferences \hspace{1cm} 26  
\hspace{1cm} 2.4.2 Household resources and restriction \hspace{1cm} 27  
\hspace{1cm} 2.4.3 Opportunities and constraints in the housing market \hspace{1cm} 29  
\hspace{1cm} 2.4.4 Understanding trade-offs in housing decisions \hspace{1cm} 31  
2.5 Examining Home Using Insights from the Critical Geographies of Home  
\hspace{1cm} 2.5.1 The sense of home  
\hspace{1cm} \hspace{1cm} i. Home as a site of control and autonomy \hspace{1cm} 37  
\hspace{1cm} \hspace{1cm} ii. Home as a site of privacy \hspace{1cm} 41  
\hspace{1cm} \hspace{1cm} iii. Home as a site of comfort \hspace{1cm} 47  
\hspace{1cm} 2.5.2 Sense of home in the neighbourhood \hspace{1cm} 49  

VI
2.6 Housing Governance and the Sense of Home 54
2.7 Conceptual Framework of this Thesis 57
2.8 Conclusion 59

Chapter 3
Methodology of Methods: Examining Sense of Home in Tenants’ Former Housing and Public Housing
3.1 Introduction 61
3.2 Research Aims 61
3.3 The Research Framework 62
  3.3.1 Case study methodology 62
  3.3.2 Site selection and the social context 65
  3.3.3 Data collection 67
    i. Scoping 68
    ii. Survey 69
    iii. In-depth interview 78
  3.3.4 Data analysis 82
3.4 Quality Criteria for the Research 86
3.5 Ethical Consideration 88
3.6 Conclusions 90

Chapter 4
Analysing the Evidence Part I: Housing Deficits and Sense of Home in Tenants’ Former Housing
4.1 Introduction 91
4.2 Housing Security in Tenants’ Former Housing 92
4.3 Sense of Home Within the Four Walls 96
  4.3.1 Exploring the sense of control and autonomy 97
    Within the parental homes 97
    Within private rental housing 101
    Within the squatter settlements 103
    Within the workers’ quarters 107
    Discussion 108
4.3.2 Exploring the sense of privacy and comfort
- Within the parental homes
- Within private rental housing
- Within the squatter settlements
- Within the workers’ quarters
Discussion

4.4 Neighbourhood as an Extension of Home
4.4.1 Sense of belonging to the community
- Amongst former residents of the parental homes
- Amongst former residents of private rental housing
- Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
- Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Discussion

4.4.2 Sense of belonging to place
- Amongst former residents of the parental homes
- Amongst former residents of private rental housing
- Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
- Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Discussion

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 5
Analysing the Evidence Part II: Looking to the Past to Discern Sense of Home in Public Housing
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Housing Security in Public Housing
5.3 Sense of Home Within the Four Walls
  5.3.1 Exploring the sense of control and autonomy
    - Amongst former residents of the parental homes
    - Amongst former residents of private rental housing
    - Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
    - Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Discussion
5.3.2 Exploring the sense of privacy and comfort

Amongst former residents of the parental homes
Amongst former residents of private rental housing
Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Home-making practices in public housing
Discussion

5.4 Neighbourhood as an Extension of Home

5.4.1 Sense of belonging to the community

Amongst former residents of the parental homes
Amongst former residents of private rental housing
Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Discussion

5.4.2 Sense of belonging to place

Amongst former residents of the parental homes
Amongst former residents of private rental housing
Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters
Home as workplace
Threats to sense of place
Discussion

5.5 Housing Governance: Enforcement and Maintenance

5.5.1 How do enforcement practices affect the sense of home?
5.5.2 Lack of maintenance and effects on the sense of home in public housing
Discussion

5.6 Conclusion

Chapter 6
Conclusion: Key Findings and the Way Forward

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Seven Key Findings of this Thesis

6.2.1 To the low income, housing security does not necessarily lead to sense of home
6.2.2 Housing security is not entirely defined by tenure longevity
6.2.3 Housing history importantly shapes people’s sense of home
6.2.4 The home is both material and imaginative: Bringing the ‘little things’ into the picture
6.2.5 Three layers of power relations (and identity) that shape a sense of home
6.2.6 Home is open and multi-scalar: Discerning sense of home across different spatial scales
6.2.7 Sense of home results from trade-offs that low income households make in their housing decisions

6.3 Limitations of the Study
6.4 Suggestions for future research
References
Appendices
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 The locations of the study sites and the public rental housing estates in Sarawak 14
Figure 2.1 Traditional vs. modern housing layout 45
Figure 2.2 Conceptual framework of the thesis 54
Figure 2.3 Terms and concepts associated with different components of the framework 58
Figure 3.1 The inductive and deductive procedures undertaken in this thesis's research design 64
Figure 3.2 Image showing houses in traditional Malay villages 75
Figure 3.3 Image showing private rental housing found in shop houses 75
Figure 3.4 Image showing houses in the squatter settlements 76
Figure 3.5 Image showing types of owner-occupied housing available to the low income through state programs 77
Figure 3.6 Image showing a block of government quarters 77
Figure 3.7 Image showing a row of workers’ quarters owned by private companies 78
Figure 3.8 The data collection and analysis procedures that contribute to the inductive and deductive approaches in this thesis 83
Figure 4.1 A common pipe in Siol Kandis 104
Figure 4.2 Evidence of human ingenuity in a squatter settlement 107
Figure 4.3 Different housing conditions in the squatter settlements 117
Figure 4.4 Inside a squatter house 118
Figure 4.5 A bathroom and a toilet in a squatter home 119
Figure 4.6 Former income generating opportunities in the neighbourhood 138
Figure 4.7 The long way out 141
Figure 4.8 Risky journey to school 143
Figure 4.9 Gardening and foraging in the squatter settlements 143
Figure 5.1 Better time management to focus on other tasks 157
Figure 5.2 Home-making practices in public housing 167
Figure 5.3 Roasting pork in isolation 176
Figure 5.4 Different uses of the hallway and open spaces 183
Figure 5.5 The scale of gardening taking place in public housing 185
Figure 5.6 Home-based businesses inside the dwellings and around the neighbourhood 192
Figure 5.7 Measures to enhance bodily safety 193
Figure 5.8 Preventing motorcycle theft 193
Figure 5.9  Chatting and observing  194  
Figure 5.10  Children monitoring at play  196  
Figure 5.11  Defects associated to disrepair and poor design  207  
Figure 5.12  Radical solution in response to poor maintenance  208  

LIST OF TABLES  
Table 1.1  Housing conditions of the urban poor in Malaysia, 2014  7  
Table 1.2  Total households and population by type of residential units in urban Sarawak (2010)  8  
Table 2.1  Scales of neighbourhood  51  
Table 3.1  Distribution of survey participants by estates  70  
Table 3.2  Demographic and tenure profiles of samples in Kuching’s public housing estates  72  
Table 3.3  Length of residence in former housing arrangements (years)  74  
Table 3.4  Demographic and housing profile of interviewees  79  
Table 3.5  Survey of data types, purposes and methods of analyses  82  
Table 3.6  Different layers of coding and thematic analysis employed in this thesis  85  
Table 4.1  Inability to manage household’s finances  98  
Table 4.2  Managing the in-laws  100  
Table 4.3  Challenges in collecting water  105  
Table 5.1  How neighbours render help to one another  170  
Table 5.2  How social supports materialise between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of public housing  182  
Table 5.3  Potential danger associated to disrepair  206
Chapter 1
Introduction: The Past Matters in Producing Sense of Home in Public Housing

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the rationale for investigating the interaction between people’s feelings of home and their housing histories that are documented in this thesis. The research examines public housing tenants in contemporary Sarawak, Malaysia. The arguments presented in this chapter demonstrate the limitations of the literature on people’s sense of home or the meanings they attribute to home, insofar as these are influenced by their housing histories. How the two matters relate is reflected in Rasidah’s story:

Rasidah, 44, is a single mother of six. She and four of her children have resided in Dahlia Estate, a public housing estate in Kuching since 2008. Although Rasidah is required to renew the tenancy contract every two years and she has been informed that the maximum tenure is six years, she feels happy to be still residing in public housing. She considers it a haven and it gives her pride. This is the place where she has felt happiest and most settled since her separation from her husband in 2003. Her divorce was followed by several precarious housing situations, including staying with non-relatives and occupying a classroom, before she could finally settle into public housing. (Fieldwork, July – September 2014, Kuching)

The story of Rasidah is unlike the stories of home presented in the literature, in several important ways. First, in most studies investigating how home is made in housing, sense of home is dependent on housing security. The literature strongly posits that without housing security, usually defined as the opportunity for lengthy occupancy, it is less likely that feelings of being at home would prevail. Rasidah is not in a situation where a lengthy period living in her public housing unit is likely. Second, most studies currently investigating sense of home are taken from regions where homeownership is perceived to be the norm and the most desirable or advantageous form of housing tenure. These regions include Australia and the UK. In these regions, other tenures such as social housing and private rental housing are
perceived to be inferior to homeownership because renters have no financial stake in the properties. Therefore, in terms of housing security, it is often assumed that homeowners have tenure longevity while non-homeowners are deprived of this dimension. In contrast, studies have shown that homeowners too, can be threatened by housing repossession (see Kennett et al., 2013) and that renters in Scandinavian countries are given tenure longevity (see Heijden & Boelhouwer, 1996; Hulse et al., 2011). In line with this tradition, earlier research on home and ontological security has largely focused on sense of home or how home is produced within the context of homeownership (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Saunders, 1988, 1989). Within this focus, it is argued that sense of home in owner-occupation is profoundly influenced by the amount of control and autonomy that homeowners have as they reside in the property; to utilise the space as they wish and to introduce changes to the material form of the housing through renovations and extensions. It is also perceived that unlike tenants, homeowners have the right to reside in their properties indefinitely. Rasidah’s situation is clearly not one of homeownership, in this sense.

Although more recent studies of sense of home have moved away from the context of homeownership solely, housing security, denoted by tenure longevity, remains a strong focus. The housing contexts that feed into these later studies are those of the highly governed housing sectors in developed countries including the UK and Australia. The tenures in question include private rental, social housing and other forms of non-conventional tenure such as caravan parks. For example, in Victoria, Australia, the rights and responsibilities of tenants across these tenures are governed under the Residential Tenancy Act 1997, which gives certain amount of tenure security to renters. Certainly, these studies offer more nuanced knowledge of the ways in which the home is experienced (see for example, Hiscock et al., 2001; Mee, 2007; Newton, 2008); all identify the possibilities of feeling at home in the different tenures. For example, Mee (2007) finds that most tenants in inner Newcastle report a favourable sense of home in long-term Australian public housing. Hiscock et al. (2001) argue that the sense of ontological security presumably derived from owner-occupation can also be derived from social housing; the sense of home in unconventional dwellings is reported in Newton (2008), who finds that permanent residents in caravan parks in Melbourne regard their trailers as a site where they feel safe and
protected. In short, these studies agree on the important role of housing security, defined as long-term tenancy, to enable occupants to experience sense of home in the various housing tenures.

According to Hulse and Milligan (2014, p. 643), one of the criteria of secure occupancy in private rental housing in Australia is that occupants have the opportunity to reside in the housing as long as they need, provided they abide by the tenancy conditions. Such a criterion for secure occupancy can also be extended into public rental housing. In Rasidah’s housing situation in Malaysia, housing security is not guaranteed as tenants are given a supposedly fixed term tenancy with the expectation of leaving at the end of it. This condition applies to all tenants, including Rasidah, who is a single mother on a low income, whose desire at the time of interview was to be able to reside in affordable public housing indefinitely. Despite her uncertain future in public housing, it is not less a home for Rasidah because of that. The main reason that makes her feels this way is that she experienced severe housing difficulties in the past. When she was finally offered a unit in public housing, the ‘less than ideal’ housing security was secondary to the feelings of pride and dignity gained from residing in a dwelling she considered decent and adequate. In other words, Rasidah’s housing history has significantly shaped her expectation of what home is in public housing, so much so that this factor outweighs the importance of tenure longevity, a factor that has been acknowledged in the literature as crucial to the formation of home.

Hence, this thesis is motivated by the following research question: ‘In what ways do tenants’ housing histories shape their sense of home in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak?’ The term ‘housing history’ refers to tenants’ past housing circumstances; it is denoted by housing tenure, housing forms or quality, as well as household configurations. In other words, housing history includes tenants’ former living arrangements in their past housing. These features of past housing will have affected their sense of home while living there. The term ‘sense of home’ means how people feel a sense of belonging and comfort residing in a particular place. In this thesis, the ‘place’ refers to the dwelling unit.

In this thesis, the public housing tenants’ housing histories have largely been characterised by housing deficits. Some have happy memories of the less adequate former housing, as well as unhappy memories. This means that their sense of home is always produced through
trade-offs. Consider the following insights into the different types of housing deficits (with some non-deficits) across the four housing histories identified in this thesis.

1. Tenants who formerly resided in parental homes had to share the living space with extended families and faced various difficulties with this living arrangement and household configuration;
2. Tenants who used to reside in private rental accommodation, especially rooming facilities, had very little living space and had to share utilities with other rooming tenants;
3. Tenants who formerly resided in squatter settlements had no regular access to water and electricity and their surroundings were unhygienic;
4. Unlike the previous three categories, tenants who used to occupy workers’ quarters had more favourable memories of this past housing history and importantly this shapes their sense of home now in public housing.

This thesis aims to demonstrate how the housing histories of tenants in public housing, (histories profoundly characterised by housing deficits), shaped the specific ways that these tenants now experience home in public housing. By this, I am saying that the sense of unhomeliness attributed to one aspect of the former housing is likely to accentuate the sense of homeliness attributable to that same aspect in public housing. More importantly, this thesis documents how tenants use their lived experiences of home in their housing trajectories (former housing and public housing) to make their housing decisions and it explores the ways in which they evaluate their past and present housing experiences to form their ‘sense of home’. Accordingly, this thesis offers two major contributions.

The first contribution is to specify the significance of housing history in shaping tenants’ experiences of home. The effects of housing history on home have been identified to a certain extent in the literature. However, how residents’ pasts in housing help shape their ideas of home is still under-researched, although there is a proposed framework for such undertaking (Lewin, 2001). As a result, there is little empirical evidence suggesting the ways in which the meaning of home is potentially influenced by housing history. Apart from the work of Tomas and Dittmar (1995) who demonstrate the causal relationship between home and housing histories through studying how homeless and securely housed women attach
meanings to home, other studies have merely stated, not even very explicitly, the significance of housing histories on home. In other words, the effects of housing history are implied in these studies but not followed through as a central focus of analysis (see Mee, 2007; Parsell, 2012; Wiesel et al., 2012). It is therefore, the aim of the thesis to capture (in one case study) the precise nature of this relationship.

The second contribution is to articulate how a sense of home is created amongst low income dwellers, in contexts of some informality. This context is not usually found in the literature, though Kellett and Moore (2003, p. 113) cover how home-making practices occur amongst informal Colombian dwellers following the legality of their tenures. Most previous research about sense of home is set in high income nations where housing and social services for the poor and other vulnerable groups are highly regulated. Thus far, the investigation of home amongst the poor in these places is rather limited and if anything, is likely to be from the perspective of the homeless (Kellett & Moore, 2003; Parsell, 2012; Somerville, 1992). The context of Malaysia is rather different. Being a middle income country, the forms of social and welfare support are less established than those found in previous works examining people’s sense of home. There is some provision of public housing for low income people, but also informal housing for poor people. This situation is due to the amount of public spending committed by the government for the purpose of social development. Of course, the amount of public spending dedicated to development and welfare in developing countries is less than the amount contributed in developed countries (Fan et al., 2008, p. 23). Consequently, we can expect the circumstances of urban low income families in this study to differ from those of poor families found in developed nations, because the former have very little access to institutional support. Suffice to say at this point, this study touches on a very different context from much of the current scholarly work examining the sense of home. The circumstances of urban low income families in Sarawak and their housing situations are explored in the following section.

1.2 How the Low income Live in Sarawak

This section demonstrates the different types of housing deficits experienced by the urban poor in Sarawak. I do not focus here on their ‘sense of home’ but rather on the conditions of the housing in which they live.
Housing for the urban poor in Sarawak is characterised by overcrowding and/or defects, occurring across different regulated or unregulated housing arrangements. The various housing arrangements include parental homes, private rental dwellings, workers’ lodgings or quarters, squatter settlements, as well as owner-occupation (usually found in traditional villages). In one study focusing on current and prospective tenants of public rental housing in Sarawak, it is found that the nature of housing arrangements, and therefore the form of deprivations experienced by the prospective tenants, vary across different towns in Sarawak (Abdullah et al., 2010). For example, squatter settlements are more prevalent in Kuching and Miri, while housing for the poor in Bintulu and Sibu is largely found in private rental housing (see Figure 1.1 for the locations of major towns in Sarawak).

The poor in Malaysia are ‘exposed to health hazards due to crowded living conditions’ and from residing in risky neighbourhoods (Zainal et al., 2012, p. 828). These risks can be environmental as well as social and economic. For example, in Sibu, the sites of low cost private rental housing units are regularly flooded when heavy rain meets with a high tide. Because of the poor drainage system, the floods fail to recede quickly, leading to water stagnation. Water stagnation potentially causes the breeding of pests, such as mosquitoes carrying the dengue virus (Seng & Jute, 1994), resulting in dengue fever that potentially leads to fatalities (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2016).

While the most profound stressor for the lowest income households is linked to income shortage, the experiences of stress are also related to housing tenure. For example, respondents who resided in detached houses (presumably parental homes) had to deal with problems in the relationship with their parents, whereas tenants in private rental or public housing expressed the fear of losing their shelter. The sense of home for the poor in their housing often entails emotional strain and the sense of being unsettled.
Table 1.1: Housing conditions of the urban poor in Malaysia, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing tenure and conditions</th>
<th>Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tenure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-occupation</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ Quarters</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing Condition</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>79.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deteriorating/Dilapidated</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access to piped water</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piped water in the house</td>
<td>89.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public standpipe</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Modified from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2014, p. 103)

The housing conditions of urban low income households in Malaysia are summarised in Table 1.1. Based on the table, slightly over half own the houses they reside in, one-fifth are occupying poor housing conditions and one-tenth do not have access to direct piped water supply in their dwellings. The information offered on Table 1.1 however, does not show the household configurations occurring in these dwellings. In other words, there is no indication on how many people live inside the dwellings. This information is provided in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 shows the distribution of population and residential units across different types of housing in urban Sarawak. Houses (75 percent) form the largest proportion of residential types and this figure corresponds with the local preference for landed properties. Most low cost properties and kampong houses belong in this category. The table also shows the other types of dwelling, namely shop houses, flats, improvised or temporary huts, that are likely to be the homes of the urban poor. As suggested in the statistics, crowding is likely to occur in shop houses and rooming facilities (see column five). This is indicated by a higher ratio of household number to the number of residential units in both housing types, with 1.15 in shop houses and 1.16 in rooming facilities. This means that there are 115 households distributed across 100 units of shop houses, and 116 households distributed across 100 rented rooms. The ratios presented in column six demonstrate a higher prevalence of crowding in rooming facilities compared to other housing types; that is, on average there
are three to four persons occupying a room. A rented room is most suited to accommodating one occupant, yet in Sarawak due to poverty, several persons may cram into one room to reduce housing costs (Abdullah, 2013, p. 272).

Table 1.2: Total households and population by type of residential units in urban Sarawak (2010)

| Type of residential units | Urban\(^a\) | | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                           | Residential units | Households | Population | Household: Residential unit | Population: Residential unit |
| Total in Sarawak          | 280,588      | 286,492     | 1,249,752   | 1.02         | 4.45 |
| House\(^b\)              | 233,689      | 237,252     | 1,050,819   | 1.02         | 4.50 |
| Shop house                | 10,173       | 11,715      | 46,385      | 1.15         | 4.56 |
| Flat                      | 25,787       | 26,030      | 109,656     | 1.01         | 4.25 |
| Other multi-story\(^c\)  | 5,679        | 5,725       | 21,598      | 1.01         | 3.80 |
| Longhouse                 | 814          | 823         | 3,930       | 1.01         | 4.83 |
| Improvised/Temporary hut  | 1,112        | 1,159       | 3,746       | 1.04         | 3.37 |
| Room                      | 2,664        | 3,099       | 10,378      | 1.16         | 3.90 |
| Others                    | 670          | 689         | 2,745       | 1.03         | 4.10 |

\(^a\)About 53 percent of the total population and residential distribution is found in the urban sector of Sarawak.

\(^b\)Includes detached, semi-detached, terrace/link, cluster houses and townhouses. Kampong houses are also included in this category.

\(^c\)Including apartments and condominiums.

Source: Modified from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010, p. 33)

The prevalence of squatter settlements\(^1\) across major cities and towns in Malaysia is another indication that the housing crisis experienced by the urban poor is not being adequately addressed. As of 2015, there were 62,509 squatter housing units across the country, with the highest number reported in Sabah (26,479 units), followed by Johor (8,346 units) and Sarawak (7,784 units) (National Housing Department Malaysia, 2015, p. 12). Because squatter settlements are considered illegal, they are without regulated facilities or

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\(^1\)A substantial number of the very poor in urban Sarawak reside in squatter settlements. The incidence of squatters however, does not appear in the above statistics compiled by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, as the matter of squatter settlements falls under the responsibility of the National Housing Department at the federal level of housing governance in Malaysia. The governance of squatters at the Sarawak state level is under the jurisdiction of the Land and Survey Department.
services that characterise ‘formal’ settlements in an urban setting. Apart from the lack of basic amenities such as water and electricity, squatters are also deprived of a regulated waste disposal system. In fact, the ways in which squatters dispose of waste are harming the environment. Half of the squatter population in Kuala Lumpur dispose of their waste openly, discarding it into a river or through open burning (Murad & Siwar, 2007, p. 4). The inadequate garbage disposal methods attract pests and vermin, posing health threats to the squatters through the spread of contagious diseases. In short, the material housing deprivation experienced by squatters seems to be worse than that experienced by dwellers in ‘regulated’ housing types.

Based on the materials presented above, two important messages become clear. First, urban low income families, including those in Sarawak, end up in different housing tenures or arrangements that are likely to result in specific types of housing deprivation. Second, the specific housing deprivations potentially affect how a sense of home is experienced in a certain manner, unique to each housing arrangement. The issues are multi-dimensional, ranging from strained relationships with household members in the parental homes to unhygienic living environments in the squatter settlements.

In order to help urban low income households to obtain adequate housing, affordable housing programs have been initiated with an overarching aim of assisting those households to become homeowners. In essence, these programs are categorised into two types; the main category intends to provide affordable housing for sale while the other category seeks to provide affordable housing for the purpose of renting (this is known as the ‘People’s Housing Program (for Rental)’ (Housing Development Corporation, 2014). Both programs are explained in the following section.

1.3 Affordable Housing Programs in Malaysia

This section introduces the affordable housing programs for the urban poor in Malaysia and the extent to which these options are accessible to this group of people. In this section, I detail the reasons that hamper accessibility to the programs, resulting in prolonged experiences of housing deficits amongst the target population these programs are meant to serve. Consider the two major programs and their respective challenges.
1.3.1 Affordable homeownership programs

As indicated by the name, these programs are dedicated towards providing homeownership – addressing people’s aspirations to become homeowners. In fact, pro-poor housing programs in Malaysia were started in the 1960s. Over time, more homeownership programs have been included to increase the supply of affordable housing to different target groups. The initiatives include mandating private developers to contribute to the housing stock through certain policy reforms (Syafiee, 2011), for example, private developers are required to supply fifteen to thirty percent affordable housing units in any development above ten acres (Real Estate & Housing Developers’ Association Malaysia). Other state or federal programs include housing repair for the very poor and in-situ new housing construction. The former is targeted at elderly people, the disabled or single mothers, while the latter is targeted to landowners who have little means to build their own homes (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2015). The in-situ new housing construction is packaged with subsidised housing credit, in which successful applicants are required to pay only two-thirds of a zero interest loan according to a set repayment plan (BR1M 2016, 2016).

Despite the numerous programs set in place to assist low income households to become homeowner, it is still difficult for them to own a home. One major problem concerning the affordable homeownership program is the consistent shortage of supply (Economic Planning Unit, 2010; Syafiee, 2010; Tan, 2011). As housing prices are set with very slim profit margins (if any), developers are less inclined to fulfil the quota. This scenario is worth explaining. It occurs as follows. Over the years, the fixed house price has not moved in tandem with increasing construction costs. Therefore, developers are required to employ a cross-subsidy mechanism, by which the ‘deficits’ in low-cost housing are supplemented by the profit from higher income housing in the same development. This also means the price of higher cost housing may be increased to secure adequate funds to cover the deficits. Alternatively, the number of low-cost units is reduced or more high-end housing is built to maximise profit, or, private developers may complete their quotas using low quality materials to cut costs. The situation is made worse when the distribution of available housing stock is often politicised and open to abuse in Malaysia (Mohd Razali, 2002; Syafiee, 2009).

Another significant problem is the inability of low income applicants to secure credit from financial institutions given their lack of creditworthiness (Abdullah, 2013, p. 274). According
to Donald (2013, p. 9), about twenty to thirty percent of prospective home buyers belonging to lower income groups in Sarawak have been turned down by the banks even though they have passed the eligibility criteria set by the Ministry of Housing and Urbanization to buy into the affordable housing market.

On top of these challenges, there are also structural issues that make adequate housing less accessible to the urban poor. The delivery of the housing repair and in-situ new housing programs for example, has been restricted due to limited funding. Based on my conversation with one district official in Kuching in early 2014, out of 2000 plus applications received in 2013, only 65 were approved for housing repair while 15 were approved for in-situ new housing construction. The approvals were granted for the more severe cases only. The very strict criteria imply that a tenant in public rental housing is unlikely to be given this assistance (if he or she has an inhabitable dwelling that requires repairs) because it is presumed that when tenants can afford to pay rent in public housing, their housing situations are considered ‘less critical’.

1.3.2 Public rental housing in Sarawak

The second category of affordable housing programs are public rental housing. Motivated by a national agenda to eliminate squatting by 2020, the public rental facilities are meant to house low income families, with priority given to squatters. In Sarawak, the drive to eliminate squatter areas started with the relocation of families into the Demak Laut People’s Housing Project in Kuching, built in 2002. Two projects, namely Sri Wangi and Dahlia, were later developed in Kuching, establishing 1,272 rental units across the three estates. To date, there are 3,016 completed units across five estates in Sarawak (National Housing Department Malaysia, 2015, p. 9). This thesis focuses on the three earlier estates, which are Demak Laut, Sri Wangi and Dahlia (see Figure 1.1). The total number of public housing units contributes only 0.6 percent to the total housing stock in Sarawak or about forty percent of the number of squatter houses. Although the latter figure looks promising, the calculation does not include people from other forms of urban poor housing included in Table 1.2. In other words, the stock is extremely limited and application to enter public housing involves a long waiting list. Under the current practice, an estimated waiting period is five years, after which applicants who are still on the waiting list need to renew their applications. The
actual waiting period may be less but there are cases where tenants have had to wait for more than five years before they received an offer to enter public housing.

The rent is currently set at RM100 – RM150 monthly (equivalent to AU$33 to AU$50) and it is significantly below the market price. A housing unit of similar quality in the market may fetch two or three times this subsidised rental value. Households earning between RM650 – RM3000 (AU$217 – AU$1000) per month are eligible to apply for the rental units; however, as mentioned earlier, priority is given to squatters. Single people are not eligible to apply for public housing. Successful applicants are given an initial lease of two years and their chances for renewal depend on their good payment and behaviour records. The maximum tenancy is six years.

In some cases, successful applicants whose household incomes fall below RM777.00 per month may be eligible for assistance in the form of a rental subsidy distributed through local councils. For example, the assistance will finance RM124.00 of the rental price while the tenant will need to cover the balance. The arrangement however, is difficult to obtain and usually is given for one year only. Recipients need to reapply for similar assistance or they might need to go to other sources such as religious organisations or political parties, to obtain other financial aid to help with their rental payment.

After the maximum lease in a public housing unit, tenants are expected to leave public housing to make way for other low income families who are on the waiting list. This expectation is embedded in the policy’s assumption that low income families will benefit from subsidised rental, so that they will be able to save up to buy into the housing market when they leave public housing. As such, tenants in public housing are given priority to own a home through the affordable homeownership program. This arrangement suggests that public rental housing also serves as a feeder to this program. However, not everyone is able to follow the linear pathway embedded in the programs. Some twenty to thirty percent of the unsuccessful applicants for the affordable homeownership program, as noted by Donald (2013, p. 9), were in fact tenants in public housing. Consequently, the six years maximum tenancy may not be enforced as SHC acknowledges the challenges faced by low income households to enter owner-occupation. Similarly, the leniency is also attributable to the agency’s own failure to contribute significantly to the low-cost housing stock, which the
agency believes is a potential factor that leads to public housing tenants’ inability to enter homeownership. It is common that tenants who have exceeded their 6 years maximum tenancy are reminded every now and then that their tenancy has lapsed, and that they should start thinking of other housing options.
Figure 1.1: The locations of the study site and the public rental housing estates in Sarawak

Source: C. Jayasuriya (2016). The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.
Despite the existence of these programs, many low income families in urban Sarawak have little option but to continue occupying substandard dwellings in, or closer to, the city; some of the housing is severely compromised, like that found in the squatter settlements. This situation suggests that the programs are only capable of addressing the poor’s housing problems to a certain extent. Even then, families who are recipients of the affordable housing programs, especially public rental housing, often feel unsettled due to the existing exit policy. This brings us to another issue concerning tenure security in public housing in Sarawak, a very different issue from that which is commonly observed in other countries.

1.4 How Does Public Rental Housing in Sarawak Compare to Other Countries?

This subsection compares and contrasts the implementation of public housing policy in other countries, particularly in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore, in relation to Sarawak. It is worthy to note that there have been studies investigating the sense of home in all three other regions, yet none in Sarawak. As such, the Sarawakian context used in this thesis serves to introduce yet another context to increase current understanding of the sense of home.

All studies seem to agree that housing security is important to promote stability and a sense of home in public housing (see Lee & Yip, 2006; Mee, 2007; Taylor, 2012; Yuen et al., 2006) although there are certain challenges associated with living in this form of housing (see Silver, 2011; Yau, 2011). For example, Yau (2011) spoke about incidents of anti-social behaviours in Hong Kong that could easily threaten peace and harmony on the public housing estates, whereas Silver (2011) discussed the detrimental effects of marginalisation, denoted by social problems occurring on large public housing estates in Canada.

Within the Asia Pacific region, there are several public housing systems, which could be used as a comparison to the Malaysian system. Consider public housing in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong, bearing in mind that public housing is more established in these jurisdictions.

Across the different states in Australia, public housing is offered long term depending on tenants’ housing needs and income. Priority is given to the homeless, the disabled and people with special needs including single persons, with other forms of assistance in place to address their needs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016; NSW Government,
2016; State Government of Victoria, 2016). Yet, it is important to note that in New South Wales, public housing is offered on fixed terms, akin to public housing in Sarawak. The newly introduced New South Wales policy is highly contested and this thesis potentially demonstrates why a fixed tenure is not better than a long-term tenancy. Currently, the public housing stock is standing at about 3.5 of all housing stock in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

A larger proportion of public housing is found in Hong Kong, with thirty percent of housing stock contributed by this sector. Hong Kong offers long-term tenancy, depending on occupants’ housing needs and income. In this location, apart from considering households who are experiencing housing crises, priority is also given to elderly applicants age 58 and above. In fact, there are schemes to allow extended family members to reside together or nearby under the ‘harmonious families priority scheme’ (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2015).

Another city state, Singapore, has successfully supplied public housing for the purpose of ownership to eighty percent of its people (Housing and Development Board, 2016b). The provision of public housing is under the responsibility of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and therefore, the units are commonly known as ‘HDB flats’. Low income households who are ineligible to own HDB flats are given long-term tenancy in public rental housing. In other words, occupants are experiencing housing security regardless of tenure type in Singaporean public housing. Similar to Hong Kong, the priorities set in the public housing program in Singapore are family and elderly oriented. Specifically, there are priority schemes to encourage parents and married children to reside nearby or together, and there is also a scheme catering for elderly people who wish to age in place (Housing and Development Board, 2016a). In both the Singapore and Hong Kong public housing systems, except for the single elderly, there is a limited quota for the number of single people eligible to enter public housing.

So, how does Sarawakian public housing compare to the three public housing systems described above? There are three matters worth addressing in this section. First, unlike the provision in Sarawak, tenure longevity is apparent in all three public housing systems (with the exception of New South Wales where the state recently implemented a controversial
fixed tenure). More importantly, in the Australian system, it is recognised that housing provision alone does not provide a cure to all social problems; usually tenants are given other forms of assistance to get them back on their feet. Such considerations are absent in the implementation of Sarawak public housing. Second, the importance placed on family life in public housing in the Sarawak case has some similarities to the programs found in Hong Kong and Singapore. Families in the two city-states are encouraged to grow together in a secure housing environment for as long as they need, however, there is no guarantee that families in Sarawak are able to enjoy such security. Finally, the policies in the three other jurisdictions give priority to different aspects of vulnerability such as homelessness, disability and ageing. In Sarawak, it seems that priority is only given to squatters (and those needing emergency housing) even when applicants from other tenures are experiencing equally severe disadvantages in their housing. Based on these comparisons, it can be concluded that implementation of public housing policy in the other jurisdictions entails more profound housing security and is more responsive to other forms of vulnerability, than that found in Sarawak public housing.

Little is known about how a sense of home occurs in a setting where public housing is insecure, and this is the question that this thesis sets to unpack, using housing history as a dominant dimension to explore the phenomenon.

1.5 Conclusion and the Structure of this Thesis

In this chapter, I have provided the rationales for this thesis. The first rationale focuses on the fact that little is known about how people’s housing history influences their sense of home. In this study, housing histories are largely characterised by housing deficits. The importance of context in understanding the framing and sense of home is the second rationale. Research on meanings of home produced thus far is largely taken from high income English-speaking nations where the social and economic context is profoundly different from a middle income Asian situation. Thirdly, the current literature on home rarely reflects on poverty (except homelessness), so this study expands upon the meaning of home or sense of home through the experiences of poverty, in a region where institutional intervention is limited by restricted resources. Finally, sense of home in temporary public housing is another aspect requiring more attention in the literature on home. The fact that a sense of home is still attainable for people subject to a fixed-term lease (contrary to the
popular expectation that tenure longevity is prerequisite to sense of home) draws our attention to the role of housing history in defining home. It is then, the goal of this thesis to unpack the relationship between sense of home and housing history in the seemingly disadvantaged form of public housing in Sarawak.

To do so, this thesis is organised as follows:

**Chapter Two** reviews some of the literature on housing histories, the literature of housing security and housing governance, the literature on home, and the literature on housing behaviours. This chapter brings together two main bodies of work central to interdisciplinary housing studies, namely the critical geographies of home and the life course approach to housing behaviours, to develop a conceptual framework that examines the ways in which housing history leads to the sense of home in a situation where tenure longevity is uncertain.

**Chapter Three** discusses the case study methodology adopted in this study. In particular, this chapter provides details about the research design, the ways in which the respondents are recruited, as well as the procedures of data coding and analysis. The procedures suggest the outline of two fundamentally linked empirical chapters, which respectively capture interviewees’ sense of home in their former housing and interviewees’ sense of home in their current housing (public housing).

**Chapter Four** provides the accounts of interviewees’ sense of home in their former housing. As mentioned above, this chapter is linked to the next chapter, as it allows readers to understand the different ways tenants in the Sarawak public housing experience sense of home. There are two parts of the discussions: the sense of home inside the dwelling and the sense of home outside the dwelling unit. In the former, the sense of home is critically articulated using the idea that the home is a site of control, privacy and comfort. The latter section discusses how the sense of home is attained through people’s sense of belonging to place and community.

**Chapter Five** discusses how interviewees’ sense of home in public housing is specifically shaped by their sense of home in their former housing (as provided in Chapter Four). The organisation of this chapter is similar to its preceding chapter. In addition, this chapter
brings into light the ways that public housing governance affects residents’ sense of home in the Sarawak context. Further, the chapter discusses the idea of trade-offs amongst low income households in their housing decisions, as well as the rationales and the implications of the decisions.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by reflecting on its key findings and how these contribute to the scholarly space about sense of home, particularly in the contexts where people are in vulnerable housing situations. In addition to making recommendations for future research, this chapter argues for different ways to reconceptualise key concepts in housing studies.
Chapter 2
Literature Review: Housing History and Sense of Home

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the conceptual framework used to examine the ways in which housing history affects sense of home in a less secure Sarawak public housing. It also reviews the literature relevant to the topic, in order to justify the conceptual framework. To do so, I will bring together insights from two bodies of work that are central to the contemporary, interdisciplinary literature of housing studies. The two primary bodies of work are the critical geographies of home, primarily advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006) and the life-course approach to housing behaviours developed by Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999). Apart from these two main perspectives, there are other concepts that contribute to the conceptual framework. In particular, this framework sets out to examine the ways in which tenants’ housing histories – predominantly characterised by specific housing deficits – shape their experiences of home, or sense of home in public housing.

The life-course approach to housing behaviour and the insights from the critical geographies of home are brought together to examine the ways in which tenants’ senses of home are affected by the decisions that they make about their former housing. In brief, the life-course model demonstrates how people’s housing needs and real options are mediated by their household characteristics (income, household configurations, housing preference) and the housing market context. This model helps to explain why tenants end up in certain housing histories prior to entering public housing. It is important to note that tenants’ housing histories are largely characterised by housing deficits, which have led to certain experiences of home in the past. The sense of home in tenants’ former housing profoundly influences the sense of home that they experienced in public housing. In this thesis, the term ‘former housing’ refers to tenants’ housing histories, denoted by their housing tenure, housing forms and household configurations in the past. In the simplest expression, the sense of home refers to the feelings of belonging and comfort that people have towards their dwelling. A more detailed explanation about how the idea of home is currently understood, is provided in sections to come.
Before moving on to the next section, I first need to unpack a term that appears frequently in the sections that follow. This term is ‘housing deficits’. In the literature, the phenomenon of unmet housing needs is termed ‘housing deficits’. It is taken from earlier work on housing inadequacies that necessitate residential mobility (see Cho et al., 1990; Morris & Jakubczak, 1988; Morris et al., 1988). In these studies, the term is used to explain a housing situation that fails to meet cultural norms, and is evaluated using the following housing criteria: tenure status, type of dwelling, and number of bedrooms (Cho et al., 1990, p. 46). Cho et al. identify that in the US, there is a strong preference for owner-occupation, single-family dwelling. Anything less is termed housing deficits. According to Morris et al. (1988), in a situation where housing deficits are overwhelming, housing relocation will occur to remove the deficits but not every household is able to do this due to limited resources. Cho et al. (1990) observe that families will perform adjustments to remove their housing deficits, until they achieve homeownership, an accepted, and aspired to housing tenure in the US. Although housing norms are culturally specific and vary across the globe, certain common traits can be observed. For example, the preference for homeownership prevails across regions and nations, regardless of their development state. Such preference is shown in the following work: in English speaking regions (see Cho et al., 1990; Cook et al., 2013; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Fincher, 2004; Saunders, 1989), in Asia (see Azhan & Abdullah Sani, 2012b; Chin, 2004; La Grange & Yip, 2001), in Latin America (see Van Gelder, 2013) and the middle-east (Opoku & Abdul-Muhmin, 2010).

The ways in which housing deficits are understood, are limited to some extent. Housing deficits are rigidly attributable to physical housing characteristics and the idea of a linear housing progression has been critiqued widely in the housing literature. Despite its limitations, this concept of deficits is useful to capture housing inadequacies in the context of this study, which are primarily ‘physical’ in nature. At this point, it is also worthy to note that housing deficits are tied to the idea of housing trade-offs, elaborated further in Section 2.4.4.

2.2 Housing Security and the Sense of Home

Housing security is understood to be an important dimension that influences people’s sense of home. This section unpacks the current knowledge that frames housing security and its
effects on home, and following this, I briefly outline how my thesis contributes to this scholarly space.

The literature assumes the importance of housing security, primarily denoted by tenure longevity, on people’s sense of home. Many of these studies took place in English-speaking, developed regions, where owner-occupation, nuclear households occupying single-family dwellings are the norm (see Fincher, 2004; Tester & Wingfield, 2013). Such characteristics are perceived to be the criteria that produce homeliness, particularly when homeownership is tied to the idea of ‘constancy’ (as substantiated in the concept of ontological security) and longevity of tenure (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Giddens, 1993; Saunders, 1989). It is however, not necessarily the case as homeowners are subject to certain vulnerabilities exemplified by the 2008 global economic crisis which led to negative housing equity and repossessions (Kennett et al., 2013, p. 11).

There is emerging work interrogating sense of home in other housing contexts but these studies are limited to situations where residents have access to tenure longevity. These studies include examining sense of home in public housing in English-speaking first nations (Hiscock et al., 2001; Mee, 2007; Taylor, 2012) and in Asia (Chin, 2004; Lee & Yip, 2006). Newton’s (2008) research focusing on caravan parks (perceived as an unconventional and residual type of housing) in Melbourne, has found the desirable effects of a long-term lease on residents’ sense of home. She reported ‘the embodied and emotional attachment to home’ shown by permanent residents who have stayed ‘for many years, even until death, and who commit to a site as home, beautifying it and retreating into it for privacy’ (p. 229). Other studies unpack the meanings of home in newly legalised settlements (previously slums) in Mexico (Van Gelder, 2010; Van Gelder, 2013). In short, these studies establish the importance of long-term leases in promoting residents’ sense of home. My study on the other hand, comes from a different housing context where tenants do not have guaranteed tenure longevity yet many of them feel ‘at home’ there (in Sarawak public housing). What reasons are behind this view, which is in contrast to so much of what we find in the literature?

To answer this question, Hulse and Milligan’s (2014) new framework to review the concept of housing security is useful. According to Hulse and Milligan (2014) there is more to
housing security than just tenure longevity. Tenure longevity, according to Hulse and Milligan, is an outcome of legal and policy prescription that shape certain housing contexts. In brief, they argue that we need to revisit the definition of housing security beyond the legal and policy perspectives, and that there are several layers of housing security – *de jure*, *de facto* and perceptual security. *De jure* security in simple terms, refers to individuals’ access to property rights to occupy and use a dwelling. *De facto* security ‘refers to the occupation and use of property such that, over time, occupiers may acquire greater security and the risks of evictions become less’ (Hulse & Milligan, 2014, p. 640). Some factors included in this category are housing affordability and tenancy conditions (i.e. a long-term lease is meaningless if tenants cannot afford the rent). Perceptual security looks at how occupants perceive their housing security in relation to their own experiences (i.e. in the context of illegal housing, occupants may feel ‘more secure’ in their home if it is known that a state has weak enforcement practices). This framework is useful to interrogate how certain practices, for example, non-enforcement of the exit policy in Sarawak public housing (cited in Chapter 1), contribute to tenants’ perception of their housing security. This is to say that the framework is useful to explain the different ways that housing security materialises in Sarawak public housing, which eventually shapes residents’ sense of home there.

Knowing the ways that housing security is defined in Sarawak public housing only tells the stories of home to some extent. It is important to realise how households produce certain narratives demonstrating their sense of home, for example, in the context of a fixed-term lease (this is only one aspect of my thesis). If there are tenants who find the fixed-term lease disturbing, and another group feel indifferent about it, what are the reasons that lead to the different responses? In this sense, my thesis argues for the need to examine tenants’ housing histories in order to produce a more comprehensive approach to answer this research question.

### 2.3 Housing History and the Sense of Home

The section explores the ways in which housing history affects the meanings people attribute to home, and examines the extent to which past studies have understood the causal relationship between the two concepts. In fact, there are only a few studies suggesting how housing history influences meanings of home. It is the aim of this thesis to help to fill this gap, using the stories of vulnerable households in Sarawak to demonstrate
how tenants’ experiences in their former housing shape the meanings they attach to home in public housing.

The significance of housing history in understanding senses of home has been suggested in some earlier studies, although their focus may differ (see Lauster, 2013; Lawrence, 1987; Lewin, 2001). Lawrence (1987, p. 165) argues for the importance of social history in determining housing design, the significance of the design and the home interiors. In a similar vein, Lauster (2013, pp. 185-186) relates people’s experiences in their childhood homes to their own idea of home, including home-making practices. Lewin (2001, p. 362) on the other hand, stresses the need to look at people’s ‘life experiences in different milieus and at different points in time’ to understand how elderly immigrants attribute a sense of home in reflecting on their homeland as they age. The studies reflect on the significance of history that connects the past to the present, and that housing history has profound effects on ‘people’s motivation, opinions and views on the home’ (Lewin, 2001, p. 364). In other words, these studies demonstrate the significance of housing history in understanding home, but this direction is rarely reflected in empirical work researching meanings of home.

The most thorough research linking housing histories and the meaning of home is by Tomas and Dittmar (1995), analysing the experiences of securely housed women and homeless women. The findings from this work are worth describing in detail. Tomas and Dittmar found that people tend to interpret the meanings of home in light of their housing histories – whether in the past the housing needs were met or unmet. For example, securely housed women were able to make the distinction between a ‘house’ and a home – equating the house to a shell that gives protection and a home to what occurs when emotions (such as warmth and happiness) are poured into the ‘shell’. This is contrary to the homeless women who saw little difference between the two terms. According to Tomas and Dittmar (1995, p. 504), the uncertain responses given by the homeless women indicate unstable housing trajectories characterised by frequent relocations resulting from domestic violence or moves between foster carers. Amongst the securely housed women, the distinction between the meaning given to ‘house’ and ‘home’, suggests their positive housing experiences. They were able to imagine certain expectations of a ‘home’. In the experiences of the homeless women, the basic functions of a dwelling, offering safety and protection, have been elusive throughout their life-courses. Therefore, their meaning of home is in fact
reflecting their unmet housing needs – that they have been unable to have a protected and secure living environment. Many of the homeless women in the study, unfortunately, do not see themselves obtaining a secure home, given their life-course trajectories. Their pasts are characterised by prolonged abusive and threatening housing experiences and their lack of material capacity to achieve a secure housing. Yet the necessity to feel safe and protected is continuously sought. Where a safe and protective shelter is absent, some of the homeless women found protection and safety in relation to men. The protective nature of the relationship (sometimes abusive yet ‘tolerable’ for some) becomes their ‘home’ (Tomas & Dittmar, 1995, pp. 508-509). In this case, home is found in a person and not in a place.

Drawing from the notion of housing deficits particularly among vulnerable groups, I now introduce the recent work of other scholars to examine the link between housing history and the meaning of home. Wiesel et al. (2012, p. 60) and Mee (2007) observe the significance of tenants’ housing histories as they reported favorable lived experiences of home in public housing in Australia. According to Mee (2007), tenants who previously resided in private rental housing reported a better sense of housing security in public housing due to the more affordable rent (p. 211). Even basic, and often taken for granted, utilities could enhance one’s sense of home. For example, the appreciation of hot water for a shower is found in the narratives of interviewees who were formerly homeless (Wiesel et al., 2012). Similarly, when people sleeping rough, captured in the work of Parsell (2012), equated ‘house’ to home, it is a reflection of a necessity they did not possess – an enclosed space where they could find shelter and protection for themselves and their belongings (and see Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). Though Blunt and Dowling (2006) have reminded us not to make this reduction (equating home to a house), in the absence of a protective roof, this ‘reduction’ cannot be avoided – primarily because home is a place to which we attach special meaning. How we arrive at a certain meaning is very much shaped by our housing history. Where positive fulfilment of home in the past reinforces the expectations of an ideal home (with the possibility of creating a sense of unhomeliness when the ideal is not met in a new place), the lack of it leaves one to seek what would efficiently form one’s definition of home, a house – although sometimes this involves very basic requirements.
2.4 Exploring Tenants’ Housing Options using the Life-Course Approach to Housing Behaviour

In this section, I am using insights from the life-course approach to housing behaviour primarily developed by Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999) to conceptualise the idea of housing deficits that profoundly characterise people’s housing histories in this thesis. Here, I purposely limit the concept of housing deficits to aspects of housing tenure or housing arrangements: size, type and location of the dwelling. We are speaking here of the material characteristics of housing, not the emotional responses to them.

This model explores the interactions between life-course trajectories and the decisions people make surrounding their housing (these include the tenure, type, size and location of their dwelling) (Van Ham, 2012, p. 47). It is largely derived from the housing behaviourist perspective; how people’s attitudes towards housing alter following a change in their circumstances. There are three components in this behaviourist model: housing needs and preferences; household resources and restrictions; and opportunities and constraints in the housing market. The first component explores how people’s attitudes toward their housing alter as their life courses change and the latter two explain the extent to which households are able to fulfill their housing ideals given existing housing policies and the amount of resources they have available to them.

2.4.1 Housing needs and preferences

This component examines the changes in housing needs and preferences across different life-course trajectories. For example, single persons are often associated with rental units in the city, while middle income families with children are perceived akin to living in single-family separated dwellings preferably owner occupied, in the suburbs. The two cited examples are commonly found in the life-cycle literature reflecting its development in the context of North American cities. However, it is important not to equate the life-course approach to the life-cycle approach. The latter speaks about housing needs and preferences following the transition of one’s family stage (see Doling, 1976), while the life-course approach observes housing outcomes caused by this but also by other dimensions such as income and institutional barriers. The combined effects of income and institutional barriers largely explain why, for instance, a poor family of five, ends up in shared housing in the town center in Kuching – despite their need for independent housing.
Although there is much evidence supporting the life-cycle view, as reflected in the two examples above, these housing transitions should not be taken as ‘natural’ (Van Ham, 2012). In fact, this normative and deterministic view is less relevant in contemporary societies with varied lifestyles and preferences (Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Karsten, 2007). For example, Fincher and Gooder (2007, p. 174) observe the realities of inner suburb living for families with children. Karsten (2007, pp. 89-94) notes that proximity to the workplace as well as to urban facilities, and embracing the identity of a ‘true urbanite’ are amongst the reasons that attract middle-class families to continue residing in the city of Rotterdam. This evidence shows that households are willing to make certain trade-offs in order to obtain their desired housing outcomes (see Brun & Fagnani, 1994). Then again, it is also important to realise that not everyone has the opportunity to transition into their desired housing tenure – be it ‘predicted’ or ‘unpredicted’ – despite the changes in their life-courses.

### 2.4.2 Household resources and restrictions

This component of the life-course model explains the extent to which households are able to acquire housing that meets ‘cultural norms’, given their available resources or restrictions. According to Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999), the different life-course trajectories set in train by household characteristics – education and work – may have enabling or limiting effects on housing options. For example, a young individual who has just entered the labour market may continue to stay in the parental home due to limited resources. In a culture where young, working adults are expected to move out from their parental homes, this option (to continue staying in the parental home) is considered a housing deficit. As housing is a composite good, certain housing qualities are often traded off due to certain restrictions (Van Ham, 2012, p. 52). For example in Shanghai, it is found that urban low income temporary residents choose to reside in cramped shared housing just to save costs and to be closer to a workplace in the city (Wu, 2002, p. 109). In this case, the lack of resources coupled with a lack of adequate and affordable housing, forces low income urbanites to choose household circumstances within the extremely limited options available to them. Similarly, many low income households have no choice but to continue residing in deprived housing conditions, including in slums or in hazardous dwellings – due to income limits and structural reasons (Bashir, 2002; Gilbert, 1983; Gilbert & Ward, 1982). All these
examples show that low income households tend to make costly trade-offs just because of their need to keep a roof over their heads.

Oftentimes, low income families in compromised housing employ household survival strategies as part of their trade-off practices. This concept emphasises human agency or ingenuity in negotiating daily challenges, often within the dimension of economic behaviours (Wallace, 2002, p. 275). The concept is contested due to its emphasis on human agency to initiate change (rather than acknowledging the significance of institutions in creating the changes). Wallace (2002) identifies the presence of strong and weak strategies. Strong strategies include clear plans to achieve certain goals while weak strategies may be unclear but they result in certain outcomes. Among others, strong strategies include managing household economies, for example reducing expenses in secondary items to put more emphasis on fulfilling basic needs and mobilising household resources (for more strategies, see Datta et al., 2007; Lokshin & Harris, 2000; Wallace, 2002). Being a ‘responsible tenant’, by remitting rental payments promptly and not engaging in anti-social behaviours (Flint, 2004; Yau, 2011) is another example of a strong strategy.

Households engage in different survival strategies to maintain survival or the continuity of other important routines. The strategies largely depend on household composition, family history and the life stage of households (Moen & Wethington, 1992). Residing with extended families is an important strategy, primarily among households with young children (see Datta et al., 2007; Lokshin & Harris, 2000). Studies have also found that single parent households with younger children tend to reside with extended families to share expenses; hence, they (single mothers) are able to source more income. This arrangement however, may sacrifice their privacy. Studies have also found that single parents households with older children in Russia tend to reside on their own, and within these households, younger children are cared for by the older children while the parents are at work (Lokshin & Harris, 2000, pp. 2193-2194). This brings forth another consideration: whether the strategies applied are the best for everyone. Within a household where responsibilities are shared and members are expected to perform certain tasks in the name of household survival or adaption, it is important to observe how sense of home is shaped in this context. In line with this questioning, Simon Clarke (cited in Wallace, 2002) criticises the aspect of volunteerism
assumed in the strategy. In other words, there could be elements of ‘force’ as the strategies are performed. Wallace however, takes the middle view by arguing that:

We should be aware that a household strategy does not necessarily mean that the members of the household either like each other or even talk to each other. Households could build strategies around strong internal antipathies but nevertheless organise the division of tasks and resources among the household members. (Wallace, 2002, p. 283)

It is important to note that in this study, relocation into the Sarawak public housing involves partial displacement, where tenants’ workplace and other activities, such as ties with the old place remain unchanged – as mentioned in Clark (2012, p. 70).

This thesis documents the ways in which household survival and adaption strategies are carried out primarily in tenants’ former housing. Accordingly, it seeks to answer this question: how do these strategies affect people’s sense of home, both in former housing and public housing? In particular, how do these practices affect the experiences of home in an Asian culture, where family and kinship are valued with paramount importance?

2.4.3 Opportunities and constraints in the housing market

Apart from household resources, the extent to which households have access to housing that fulfills ‘societal norms’ is the result of the market and institutional functions that regulate access into housing (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Van Ham, 2012; Wu, 2002). These include the working of government bodies through the formulation of housing policies, and the operations of financial institutions that distribute financial credit for homeownership. How policy affects housing options is exemplified in the ‘right to buy’ scheme carried out for example, in public housing policy in the UK, Australia and Hong Kong. The policy has resulted in wider choice sets for households aiming for owner-occupation but limited sound options for social housing for those unable to buy (Arthurson, 2012; Grange & Yip, 2001; Holmes, 2006). In Singapore, the astronomical rate of homeownership is obtained through the ambitious and holistic intention of public housing policy to create ‘housing for all’ in the high income island state (see Chin, 2004).

For countries where homeownership is much desired and accepted as the ‘norm’, the biggest challenge perhaps lies in the financial institutions, assuming access into homeownership is largely through private developers. (The issue of supply of housing for
low income households, by developers, is another important matter, as described for Sarawak in Chapter 1). Housing, being the largest financial commitment for most households, could follow an upward or downward trend due to long term as well short term determinants (see Tsatsaronis & Zhu, 2004, pp. 67-68). Where the housing market is more liberal, financial commitments towards housing could soar, resulting in more restricted choice sets for low income families aspiring to be homeowners (Tsatsaronis & Zhu, 2004, p. 68; Van Ham, 2012, p. 55). While it is relatively easier for people with stable and higher income to secure credit, it is not always the case with low income earners. There are cases where applicants are required to provide additional credentials to prove their capability, to the extent of nominating credible guarantors. Not only does the procedure creates more barriers for low income homebuyers, it is a risky undertaking for the guarantor if debtors default on their payment. In fact, between 2005 and 2012, five percent of the bankruptcy reported in Malaysia could be traced back to this path (of becoming guarantors) (Harinderan, 2013).

Other considerable challenges faced by low income families include the discrimination that occurs in the highly regulated private rental market. In the case of social housing in Australia, applicants through the social security system ‘Centrelink’ often see their applications turned down despite excellent payment histories (Wiesel et al., 2012, p. 31). In brief, Centrelink is an arm of the Department of Human Services (DHS) which provides payments and services to vulnerable social groups in Australia (Department of Human Services, 2016, p. 3). Certain owners are said to feel reluctant accepting tenants on welfare and this desire is channeled through their agents. Similar cases are observed in the US where applicants on voucher schemes experience difficulties in obtaining rental housing in low-poverty neighbourhoods, consequently forcing them to resort to high-poverty neighbourhoods (DeLuca et al., 2012, p. 2). In other jurisdictions, with less regulatory control over the sector, there are opportunities for landlords to ‘regulate’ their rental properties and the tenants as they see fit. The results often include compromised housing outcomes.

Put together, the life-course approach recognises that the housing pathway is not as predictable as suggested in the life-cycle approach. Instead, it takes into account the complexities triggered by events that may take place along the individual’s passage from
birth to death (Johnston et. al., 2002, p. 448). On top of that, it is important to recognise that certain configurations of housing pathways are produced by the institutions, in many instances, pushing the poor from achieving adequate housing regardless of their stage in life. Quite often the housing decisions that the poor make are within narrow choice sets, resulting in prolonged experiences of housing deficits.

Anticipating such a situation in Sarawak, this thesis will explore the trade-offs that interviewees in Sarawak made with respect to their previous and current housing. Accordingly, how these experiences (trade-offs) eventually shaped home for them in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak will be also documented in this thesis.

2.4.4 Understanding trade-offs in housing decisions

Households, regardless of their socio-economic status, commonly make trade-offs in their housing decisions. The ways in which the trade-offs are made, are attributable to the micro and macro-level components identified in the life-course model. According to Van Ham (2012), making trade-offs is expected in housing decision making given the various reasons attributable to the components in the life-course model:

A dwelling can be described by its various characteristics such as tenure, size, style, quality and (relative) location. One cannot buy a single aspect of a dwelling separately as dwellings are bundles of characteristics, including neighborhood and access to jobs and public and private facilities. Because dwellings are composite goods, most households trade-off various dwelling characteristics and choose a dwelling that meets their most important needs and preferences within their budget and the choice set offered by the housing market. (Van Ham, 2012, p. 48)

Previous work examining trade-offs in housing is likely to focus on middle-class households. Some studies focused on the elderly, who also belong to the middle-class group. Here, I provide several examples of current studies to highlight the housing characteristics often considered in the literature. Chen et al. (2008) study the role of prior characteristics of housing in examining the trade-offs that households make with regard to commuting distances and residential locations. For instance, households who used to travel farther to work pay more emphasis on commuting distance in their housing trade-offs, compared to households who commuted shorter distances in the past (Chen et al., 2008, p. 75). A study focusing on widowhood among elderly persons in France saw them trading away larger owned homes with smaller dwellings, oftentimes apartments in the private rental sector in
areas where services, or their children, are more accessible (Bonnet et al., 2010). Brun and Fagnani (1994) reported life-style choices (I interpret it as a characteristic of a residential location) an important selection criterion among middle-income households in France. An examination of the data of homes purchased using the Federal Housing Association (FHA)-insured mortgage demonstrates different housing trade-offs made by middle income and more affluent households (Winger, 1969). In particular, Winger found that middle income households pay more attention to location than to housing space while more affluent households tend to have their housing preferences fulfilled (Winger, 1969, p. 417). These studies show that housing trade-offs tend to be restricted within certain physical housing characteristics (and perhaps unchanged over time). The pivotal characteristics include housing space, commuting time, residential locations and life-style choices. More importantly, these studies seem to suggest that trade-offs in housing are more relevant to households with better financial capacity.

The United Nations Rights to Adequate Housing (2014) has identified the following housing characteristics that need to be made available to households: tenure security, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, accessibility, reasonable location and cultural adequacy (pp. 3-4). Due to the limited affordable housing options, low income households do not have many desirable housing characteristics to choose from. The literature often mentions that poor households often end up settling in undesirable neighbourhoods (including large public housing estates) with little opportunity to leave (see Hiscock et al., 2001; Silver, 2011). In this sense, trade-offs in housing are unlikely to occur as poor households have little options to begin with. Or do they? This is in fact an important question as my thesis shall demonstrate the unconventional ways that low income households make, and rationalise their trade-offs as they continue to stay in public housing. It suffices to provide a hint here that tenants in Sarawak public housing make trade-offs between the advantages of their former and current housing, and that their sense of home in public housing results from these trade-offs.

2.5 Examining Home Using Insights from the Critical Geographies of Home

As noted thus far, the sense of home in public housing is argued to be significantly shaped by interviewees’ experiences of housing deficits in their former housing. This thesis uses the
insights gathered from the critical geographies of home to understand how interviewees attach meanings of home in two different settings (former housing and public housing).

The term ‘critical’, when used in the critical geographies of home, suggests recognising the different ways that home is likely to be experienced and therefore, defined differently. This body of work challenges ‘taken for granted’ assumptions about home. That is, home can no longer be accepted as a site always imbued with positive experiences. Rather, home is a site where constant negotiations and exchanges occur between household members who are continuously trying to create a home-space for themselves. For example, home can be experienced as a site of potential conflict within the household (Brickell, 2012). There are power relations within the home. Through a critical lens, although it seems odd to phrase it this way, the home can be either homely or unhomely. A homely home offers a sense of security, privacy, constancy and attachment. On the other hand, a home can be unhomely if it is a site of alienation, restriction and oppression.

Earlier studies observing home are limited to its sociocultural dimensions, relating sense of home as a source of ontological security (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Lewin, 2001). This thesis seeks to capture more than that, drawing on the accounts of Blunt and Dowling (2006) as they carefully outline three components that chart how the home is experienced spatially and culturally. These components argue that home is both material and imaginative; that there is a nexus between home, power and identity; and that home is multi-scalar. The components are now discussed, in turn.

The claim that home is both material and imaginative is saying that home is more than just a physical dwelling. Blunt and Dowling (2006, p. 22) argue that the home is ‘a site and a set of meanings or emotions’. While the material aspects of the home refer to the physical housing unit, there are two ways to look at the imaginative aspects of home. First, this perspective relates to the feelings that people attach to the home. Second, it refers to the ways that people imagine or perceive their home to be, oftentimes leading them to become involved in certain home-making practices. In other words, the material and imaginative aspects of the home relate to the occupants’ embodied and emotional engagement with the dwelling unit. The first imaginative aspect of the home is exemplified in the work of Newton (2008) when most of her Melbournian respondents reported feeling happy (imaginative)
residing long-term in caravan parks (material). Using another example from Newton (2008), the embodied imaginative aspect of the home is reflected in one interviewee’s collection of miniature houses in her display cabinet. The collection represents her longing for a stable home; it is a feeling stemming from her family’s regular relocations when she was still young.

The nexus between home, power and identity touches on how power and identity shape people’s sense of home within the domestic sphere. It has been argued that the domestic sphere of a home is experienced differently following one’s position in the household, notably through the effects of age, gender, class and ethnicity. This aspect of the home has gained much attention from feminist scholars as they argue that women often feel inferior at home due to the different gendered expectations in a household. Saunders (1989) disagrees with this view of unequal experiences yet he maintains that men and women are attached to the home differently. His analysis however, is based on heterosexual middle income families in the UK. On the other hand, in some cultures and places, home is likely to be a site of oppression and rejection for people with GLB (gay, lesbian and bisexual) sexual identity, although there is emerging evidence suggesting otherwise in some contexts (Egerton, 1990; Gorman-Murray, 2008). Whether or not the sense of home is experienced differently or unequally by the interviewees in this thesis, the findings will shed some light onto this ongoing debate – particularly surrounding the meaning of home among women belonging to low income groups.

Home as porous and multi-scalar suggests that the experiences of home are not bounded by or limited to the physical dwelling. According to Blunt and Dowling (2006, p. 27), the porosity of the home is demonstrated when the domestic is influenced by the extra-domestic and vice versa. They further argue that the home is ‘not separated from the public, political worlds, but constituted through them.’ One of the accounts provided in their book is home-making practices in light of diaspora, for example, creating a British home in India during British imperialism. The porosity of the home was apparent when British imperialist values were imbued into the home-making process in India, but at the same time had created ‘racial antagonism between the rulers and the ruled, and ultimately contributed to the decline of British Empire’ (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 150). Their view echoes Massey (1995), who notes the continuity of traditions as people recreate meaningful (new) places.
Another example of an open home is documented in Ziebarth (2009, p. 143), citing the negative effects of the global economic crisis in the mid 2000’s on local households in the U.S. as they faced the risk of foreclosures. Along the similar vein, Smith (2008) and Cook et al. (2013) discuss the effects of homeowners’ ability to withdraw housing equity on the meanings attached to their homes. Another example at a more intimate level shows how families residing in public housing feel unsettled (even inside their own dwelling units) from residing next to problematic neighbours such as drug dealers (Mee, 2007, p. 221). The multi-scalar idea of home recognises that home can be experienced through processes and interactions occurring at different spatial scales, ranging from the body, dwelling, into the neighbourhood, suburb, the city or even the nation (see Blumen et al., 2013; Fincher & Goeder, 2007; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Mee, 2009). In this thesis, a multi-scalar experience of home is interrogated using the neighbourhood as an extension of the dwelling, in Section 2.5.2.

The meanings of home are often understood in the literature in the context of the dwelling unit. This perspective is criticised in Blunt and Dowling (2006) as they caution that studies of home should include other meaningful places apart from the dwelling. In fact, the view that equates the home to the dwelling has been critiqued by many scholars and they challenge the simplistic notion that the home is necessarily domestic and private, and gender specific, as entailed by the assumption (see Mallett, 2004). For example, the home is perceived as a domestic sphere but unlikely to be a place of work, or the home is assumed to be a feminine space while the work environment is better appropriated by men. The counter-argument to this simplistic view mandates that the home is an unbounded site in a network of social relations (Easthope, 2004) and that it is open to many influences from financial, environmental and political processes (Cook et al., 2016, p. 1). This is to say that the home is not necessarily bound to the private or domestic nature of the dwelling. Having said this, home as dwelling is still popular amongst housing researchers in Malaysia, whose research is often situated heavily in the behaviourist tradition. The research focus is on the physical forms of housing, as the inspiration for residential satisfaction, and for home improvement practices (Abdul Ghani & Nor’aini, 2006; Azhan & Abdullah Sani, 2012a, 2012b; Azhan et al., 2012a; Nor Aini et al., 2011). Acknowledging the caution noted in Blunt and Dowling (2006), and seeking to add diversity to housing studies in the Malaysian context, this thesis
nevertheless, still treats the physical housing unit as the entry point to its analysis of home. In order to do so, we need to make sense of how the home is understood in the literature, focusing on the aspects most relevant to this thesis. But before doing so, there is a need to clarify the different terms related to home, that are regularly used throughout this thesis.

For this paragraph, I mainly refer to the work of Blumen et al. (2013) as their work explicitly differentiates the different levels of the domesticity of the home, starting from the body, as the most basic level. There are several recurring terms in this study that need to be defined. The terms are ‘the home’, ‘lived experiences of home’ and ‘sense of home’. ‘The home’ refers to one’s place of living where it holds special meanings to the occupants – oftentimes shelter, security and safety. According to Blumen et al. (2013, p. 9), the home ‘is imbued with connotations of enculturation as how to encounter the world’. This function of the home relates to the lived experiences of home. Again, with reference to Blumen et al. (2013, p. 9), the ‘lived experiences of home’ refer to a person’s bodily interactions with the materiality of location and space of significant meaning (the home). These lived experiences of home largely (but not exclusively) occur in the forms of everyday practices in a domestic realm. In other words, the lived experiences of home mean the embodied experiences that people have in their dwellings as they interact with human and non-human dimensions in that space. Through these lived experiences of home, people attach emotions to the meaningful place (the home). Blumen et al. (2013, p. 7) refer to the emotions as ‘feeling at home’, which is developed and being (re)negotiated as they interact with a significant place. In this thesis (and as well as in other scholarly works), this set of emotions is defined as ‘sense of home’. This thesis largely focuses on interviewees’ sense of home, derived from their lived experiences of home in their former and current housing.

2.5.1 The sense of home

The sense of home is a multidimensional concept, often taken as the term that most closely describes ontological security (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Hiscock et al., 2001; Kearns et al., 2000). The meanings attached to the word ‘home’ are context-grounded, depending on life experiences, life history and demographic background, including age, gender, culture and class (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). While it is commonly accepted that the home is a site of domesticity offering a sense of control and autonomy, security and safety, privacy and comfort, the meanings of home are much more than these (see in detail, Lewin, 2001, p.
and the critical emphasis on meanings of home is not always positive (Brickell, 2012), as mentioned earlier. Having said this, this thesis focuses on the following senses of home: home as a site of control and autonomy; home as a site of privacy; and home as a site of comfort. The exploration of these themes is framed using the insights from the three components of the critical geographies of home advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006). To recap, the components are home as material and imaginative; power relations and identity at home; and home as porous and multi-scalar. Material focusing on any one of these individual themes may overlap with material relating to other themes. Nevertheless, the conceptual separation is useful for a clearer analysis of each theme.

I will now consider each sense of home, in turn.

i. **Home as a site of control and autonomy**

‘Home as material and imaginative’ is a construct that asks useful questions about the ways in which households experience control and autonomy in both former and current housing. It asks in particular, the ways in which people experience a sense of control and autonomy in a dwelling of certain characteristics (and in the light of housing deficits that largely characterise tenants’ housing histories). For example, ‘to what extent do people feel that they are in control in a rooming facility, or when the dwelling is shared with other co-residing households?’ These questions seek to understand the feelings that people attach to the home, which is one of the ways of exploring the imaginative aspect of home. The other way of looking at it (the imaginative aspect of the home) is to explore the extent to which the occupants have the autonomy to engage in home-making practices (in their former and current housing) which reflect the ideas and perceptions that they have about their homes.

According to Dupuis and Thorns (1998, p. 29), being in ‘control’ at home is being ‘free from surveillance that is part of the contemporary world’. The ‘surveillance’ indicated in their work is from the outside world, which I interpret as being external to one’s self but not necessarily from outside the dwelling unit. In other words, it is possible that people could feel less in control inside their own dwellings. This rings true for multigenerational households in shared accommodation (see Easthope et al., 2015). Hence, the following conception of ‘autonomy’ is useful to add on to how this meaning of home is understood. Being autonomous at home is perceived as having:
...a mixture of freedom to and freedom from, that is the freedom to do what one wants and to express oneself and the freedom from any need to have one’s actions approved by others and from any need to conform to others’ expectations of one’s self. (Kearns et al., 2000, p. 389)

The freedom to make decisions without direct pressure from others influences the ways that the daily routines are performed, how space is utilised, and the extent to which home improvement practices are implemented (Cook et al., 2013; Dowling & Power, 2012; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Hiscock et al., 2001; Newton, 2008). Such freedom also occurs in dwellings that are perceived to be ‘below’ societal norms, such as caravan parks. Despite residing in a caravan, residents cited feeling at home as they have the freedom to make decisions on their own living arrangements (Newton, 2008). Here, they are limited by the amount of space they have yet the limitation does not erode the attachment to the trailer they call home.

In the housing literature, owner-occupation has always been regarded as the most favorable form of tenure (Cook et al., 2013; Holmes, 2006). It is often assumed that with homeownership, comes a more profound sense of control compared to other tenures. The view is echoed in Dupuis and Thorns (1998) as elderly homeowners in New Zealand commented on ‘being able to do what they wanted, when they wanted’ in their own home. In particular, one example often given to demonstrate control is that homeowners have the autonomy to carry out improvements or changes to the dwelling through the process of housing repairs and renovations. A more recent work by Smith (2008) in the UK context argues that autonomy in homeownership there has been expanded to include the freedom given to homeowners to withdraw equity from their own homes. This equity, obtained through the means of over-mortgage or refinancing, is utilised not only for home improvement purposes, but also to serve a ‘wide range of welfare needs and consumption desires’ (p. 529). Here, the privileges associated with homeownership have manifested in another form; that owners can ‘extract’ equity from their housing now without having to wait ‘too long’ to benefit from the housing equity. This aspect, assumingly, increases the desirability of homeownership. Tenants on the other hand, are said to have less general decision-making power, their autonomy is only limited to how they utilise the space inside their dwellings, hence they are less inclined to perform repairs or maintenance on the dwelling (Hiscock et al., 2001, p. 58). Nevertheless, the uncertain economy characterised by,
for example, the recent global economic crisis (Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2010; Ziebarth, 2009), may change the meaning and significance of owner-occupation. Studies have revealed that homeowners feel increasingly under threat as they face the risk of negative equity, debt, and repossession in the volatile housing market (Boheim & Taylor, 2000; Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2010; Kennett et al., 2013). Other low income homeowners face being ‘stuck’ in undesirable neighbourhoods (Hiscock et al., 2001, p. 58). These studies suggest that the position of homeownership as the paramount source of ontological security (entailing a stronger sense of control) is now in question. Having said this, homeownership continues to be viewed as an important tenure in the study about home, and continuing research in this area produces new insights. This is demonstrated in Easthope et al. (2015), where it was found that owners have more autonomy than non-owners who also share the dwelling in a multi-generational household.

The sense of control, constancy and security can also be achieved in other forms of tenure, provided they are long-term. These tenures include social housing and private rental properties (Hulse et. al., 2011; Mee, 2007; Hiscock et. al., 2001). The type of autonomy exercised in other tenures is reported to be unlike those experienced in owner occupation. Within the social rented sector, it is about having autonomy with regard to space use (Hiscock et al., 2001). In her study focusing on social housing occupants in inner Newcastle, Australia, Mee (2007) found that most interviewees regarded their units as a ‘haven’ due to the secure tenancy and affordable rent. Respondents who gave such accounts were female-headed households, who used to feel less able to cope in life due to their challenging housing circumstances. Access to affordable living in public housing has changed this, allowing them to take a certain amount of control over their lives. Another study accounted for the different ways that control and autonomy occur inside one’s residence in public housing; these include finding solitude and the ability to spend quality time with one’s children, away from the crime and violence occurring in the neighbourhood (Tester & Wingfield, 2013, pp. 75-76).

The nexus between home, power and identity is another important construct used in this thesis. Through gendered expectations and power relations at home, this construct unpacks how control and autonomy materialise in a domestic realm. The interaction between gendered positions and control at home can be observed through the division of household
labor. Women may experience control and autonomy when they become heads of households. This is evident in Dupuis and Thorns (1998) when some elderly female respondents admitted accessing control and autonomy in their own dwelling only after the death of their husbands. Female heads of households report having most control in their own dwellings (Mee, 2007; Newton, 2008). On the contrary, women in heterosexual households can have rather mixed experiences. While some studies have found that women in low income households continue to perform a significant share of household chores despite contributing to the household financially (Hennessy, 2009; Nelson et al., 1990), there are also studies suggesting women’s self-worth increases given the income they contribute to the household (see Downey & Moen, 1987, p. 330). The latter situation entails the ability to exercise better control of their domestic environment especially in terms of stress management. In another vein, Pinto and Coltrane (2013, p. 58) found that amongst Latino families, the reduction in income gap between husband and wife created a more egalitarian division of domestic labor. They argue that income has a strong ‘bargaining power’ with regard to household chores distribution, although this factor may not be reflected in other cultures.

In responding to women’s competing roles at home and at work, certain strategies have evolved over time to create work-family balance. These approaches include hiring paid domestic workers or using technology to assist in the performances of household chores (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). But these strategies, as well as the knowledge surrounding them, occur in middle class families which can afford to pay for them (Hennessy, 2009). Low income women on the other hand, may remain in inferior positions. The conflation of home and work, exemplified by the practice of working from home, may provide alternative means for women to manage the multiple roles expected of them and potentially increase self-efficacy. Some studies have shown that women’s sense of identity is accommodated by the ability to work from home. For example, Sullivan and Lewis (2001) found that women teleworkers find satisfaction from the job, yet are still able to fulfill their domestic roles because of the independence and autonomy of working from home. In relation to this theme, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which poor women in Kuching, Sarawak work from home and how this practice affects the meanings of home they experience in their former housing and/or public housing.
Overall, this thesis seeks to understand how control and autonomy are present in the daily lives of the subjects met in this thesis. It attempts to show how the lived experiences of home (framed using the components of the critical geographies of home) differ in interviewees’ former housing and in their present-day lives in public housing. As such, the questions to be answered are, ‘What are the experiences of control and autonomy in tenants’ former housing?’, and ‘How do these experiences translate into the sense of home in public housing?’ Here, the component ‘home as material and imaginative’ unpacks the question and examines the lived experiences of home.

**ii. Home as a site of privacy**

Privacy is found to be an important theme in this thesis. This thesis asks, ‘How do people experience privacy in their former housing and how do these experiences translate into a sense of home in public housing?’ The discussions on privacy in this section are largely framed using the insight of ‘home as material and imaginative’.

Privacy is linked to one’s ability to exercise control within one’s own boundaries and this ‘means the possession of a certain territory with the power to exclude other persons from that territory and to prohibit surveillance of the territory by other persons’ (Somerville, 1992, p. 532). Drawing from the work of Altman, Harris et al. (1996) argue that privacy regulations are important in the formation of self-identity, by allowing the individual to ‘define himself or herself as a unique individual and as a member of various groups, and also by promoting a sense of control’ (p. 288). Their study also found the mediating effects of privacy on place attachment at home. Similarly, privacy has been identified as an important dimension that defines ‘satisfactory childhood development’ as privacy allows opportunities for children to control their environment (Newell, 1995, p. 97). More recent studies, particularly from the English-speaking context, have rationalised the importance of children’s privacy in intra-familial relationship (Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011) for the reason of children’s development. Other functions of privacy include allowing for emotional release and to regulate communication with others (Leino-Kilpi et al., 2001, p. 665). The discussions above bring us to the element of choice in privacy regulations. Marshall (1972, p. 93) argues that ‘choice’ is crucial in the attainment of privacy; being alone does not adequately define ‘privacy’, rather ‘one must be alone when one chooses to be.’ The idea of
privacy is always tied to human interactions (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006; Mee, 2007; Ozaki, 2002).

The idea of ‘exclusion’ applies to members belonging to the same household or outside the household, covering the aspects of space, vision and smell. In brief, the spatial aspect of privacy refers to the ability to exclude others physically while the visual refers to how one escapes from others’ view. Recent studies also have shown how reducing exposure to smell and noise made by others enhances privacy and to some extent, one’s sense of confidence and security in one’s own home (see Day, 2000, p. 271; Mee, 2007). These requirements to ‘control’ and ‘exclude’ signal the significance of the physical features of a home, particularly with regard to housing forms and layouts.

Across the different housing forms seemingly associated with different cultures (Day, 2000; Fincher, 2004; Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Yuen et al., 2006), how privacy is understood importantly defines housing forms. This does not mean undermining other factors such as wealth, style and preference that too, determine housing forms – but for the purpose of this thesis, the need for privacy is observed within its cultural context. For example, it could be said that the English pay less attention to outdoor privacy by having open front lawns (Ozaki, 2002) as do the Americans with their townhouses with decks offering outlook views (Day, 2000). In Japanese and Arab cultures, there is emphasis on ‘house privacy’ by having screens of dense vegetation, or high walls surrounding the house, to escape outsiders’ views (Opoku & Abdul-Muhmin, 2010; Ozaki, 2002).

Inside the house, varied appreciations of privacy also inform the layout of the dwelling. For example, an appreciation for personal privacy in English culture creates the desire to have more spaces promoting individual privacy like bedrooms or ensuite bathrooms (Ozaki, 2002). The appreciation for family privacy over individual privacy in Japanese culture (although there seems also to be increasing appreciation for individual privacy), visualises a ‘comfortable and homely house where the family can feel relaxed together’ (Ozaki, 2002, p. 215). Furthering this idea is the practice of parents and young children sleeping together in the same room – understood as family intimacy, providing safety and certainly not seen as a violation of privacy (Ozaki, 2002; Pader, 2002). In other words, the Japanese understanding of privacy is family oriented. More importantly, Japanese practices that seemingly
contradict English culture, are culturally constructed and performed with elements of ‘choice’ and not out of economic necessity. The ability to make choices, as argued in Marshall (1972), is crucial in the attainment of privacy.

In recent years, research surrounding the issue of privacy in housing within the Malay culture has emerged, notably through the work of Ahmad Hariza and colleagues (see Ahmad Hariza, 2003; Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2008; Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2010; Ahmad Hariza et. al., 2006). In essence, the translation of privacy in Malay culture is guided by Islam. While there is less emphasis placed on outdoor privacy in a Malay traditional house reflected by the absence of fences to demarcate its boundaries (anyone can ‘trespass’ these boundaries), the layout inside the house stresses segregation of space between males and females especially when there are visitors or social gatherings. Such segregations are said to be necessary to ‘protect the modesty of the women folks within the confines of the main house’ (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009, p. 199). As Ahmad Hariza et. al. puts it in an earlier work:

...the distinctive zoning of spaces provides the level of privacy required: a guest zone (public domain) with a clear male domain at the front, and the family zone (private domain), which is the female domain... The arrangement provides privacy for the women performing everyday activities, even in the presence of male visitors (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006, p. 305).

Similar to the situation in Japanese culture, it is common among Malay families to have young children sharing sleeping areas with their parents. However, as children grow older (in Islam, at ten years old) the sleeping areas need to be segregated to ensure privacy between parents and children of different genders (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006, p. 309).

These ideals reflected in the Malay traditional house however, are less observed in modern residential areas (see Figure 2.1), with the introduction of mass housing in the form of terraced, linked or detached housing. The lack of privacy is attributed to housing design that aims to optimise space, function and cost, resulting in a less spacious and culturally insensitive housing layout (Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2010, p. 264). There are several categories of mass housing, ranging from low-cost to high-cost, with detached housing often belonging to the high-cost category. With regard to privacy, each category entails different types of challenges. For example, owners of medium-cost housing tend to relate the lack of privacy to the orientation and flow of spaces inside the dwelling (Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton,
2010, p. 266). For families residing in two-bedroom low-cost housing (primarily built between the 60s and 80s), the biggest challenge involves the separation of sleeping areas between the three parties (parents, sons and daughters) in which bedrooms are often distributed to either two parties or by gender (when parents are sleeping separately) (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006, p. 310). Either way, privacy for the different members in the family is compromised. The situation is very common among low income families with limited housing options – yet, some families have experienced worse situations, as demonstrated in this thesis.
Figure 2.1: Traditional vs. modern housing layout

(Left) The Malay traditional house is spacious, with separated domains for males and females. There used to be one bedroom for the sleeping area of young females (see image) but the teachings of Islam have introduced more permanently enclosed rooms replacing the use of curtains to create separated sleeping areas for household members. The female domains (including the kitchen) are large enough to entertain guests. Image is sourced from Ahmad Hariza et al. (2006, p. 305). (Right) This is a layout of a typical terraced house with typical modifications (shaded in grey). The design is ‘compact’ with no separated domains for males and females. During social gatherings, females often gather in the dining area or kitchen while males are in the living room. The need for a bigger kitchen (for the purpose of cooking and entertaining) explains why this space is a must for renovation. Image is sourced from (Saji, 2012, p. 143).
Many of the examples cited above demonstrate the material lived experiences of nuclear families living in their own housing unit. How other households experience privacy – for example, families in shared accommodation or extended families – is still underexplored. Having said this, the work of Klocker et al. (2012) focusing on extended families in Australia demonstrates how spatial use or social goals are heavily adjusted or renegotiated to minimise conflict as well as to maintain privacy and independence. Two major living arrangements are considered under this household configuration. The arrangements are families *living together but apart* (family units share a roof but live independently such as performing household chores for their own families only) or *living together* (sharing resources and communal space) but over shorter periods. Larger or extended households living under one roof could result in greater environmental benefits and respond well to caring needs (Klocker & Gibson, 2013, p. 557) yet some challenges cannot be avoided. Klocker et al. (2012) observe how the lack of privacy is not just about physical boundaries but also about material practices, like more domestic chores for women in a *living together* household. Other observations include how one’s privacy could be easily disrupted by children who recognise little of the imaginary boundaries agreed by the adults in the *living together but apart* household or how one’s private domain is only limited to a bedroom in the *living together* arrangement. Despite the challenges, the authors agree on the potential of extended households but this living arrangement must be supported with housing forms that allow households to ‘enjoy independence and togetherness on their own terms – and without treading on each other’s toes’ (Klocker & Gibson, 2013, p. 557). While the study is taken from an English speaking culture where individual privacy is highly appreciated – hence, there is more room to negotiate individual family’s preferences – it would to be a different story in an Eastern culture where family privacy is valued more highly than personal privacy. As such, I foresee *living together* as the primary arrangement in Asian extended households, reflecting how ‘family’ is understood in Eastern culture. ‘Family’ in this culture refers to the family continued across generations (Ozaki, 2002) and this definition often includes adults, parents or grandparents in a family. How this ‘different story’ unfolds is an interesting area of exploration in this thesis.

The exploration of privacy in this section is framed within the component of ‘home as material and imaginative’. Accordingly, this thesis examines how housing deficits affect the
experiences of privacy in one’s former housing, and how these specific experiences translate into the meanings attached to home in public housing.

iii. Home as a site of comfort

Another important sense of home located in this thesis is ‘home as a site of comfort’. A site of material and imaginative comfort, home includes the use of a dwelling for relaxation, to recuperate and to restore oneself after a day’s work. In home-making practices, space use is combined with the use of technology to create a comfortable home. Quoting the work of Rybcynski, Blunt and Dowling (2006) show how ‘indoor plumbing, gas and then electric lighting, and central heating made the attainment of a comfortable home less physically demanding’ (pp. 95-96). The creation of a homely home is further made possible with the use of domestic appliances like washing machines, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and dishwashers. To accommodate this ideal of ‘comfort’, one’s housing is expected to be equipped and spacious enough to host indoor utilities and modern appliances.

The creation of a comfortable home also carries symbolic meanings. Home-making practices signal the freedom that occupants have to transform the living space into a place of comfort according to their own preferences (Cook et al., 2013; Dowling & Power, 2012; Newton, 2008). For example, the practices of decorating a place with meaningful items could signify a connection to one’s past or to cherished memories (Cook et al., 2013; Newton, 2008). Falk et al. (2013) note decorations made by the elderly in their own room in residential care always include memorable things from their old homes and these items are an important means to bridge the past to the present. More importantly, home-making practices are the reflections of individuals’ values and sense of identity. Sometimes, this desire to project certain images is taken further. In a recent study, Dowling and Power (2012) demonstrate how some owners of large houses manipulated space to project certain desirable images of themselves. This is demonstrated through their use of certain rooms in their dwellings to hide mess from the view of others while keeping the guest entertaining areas neat and tidy. Home-making practices also include renovations and extensions to a dwelling, which often entail certain decorating styles and preferences. There is a sequence to housing needs. At the most basic level, ‘housing must provide shelter from physical and emotional threats in the environment, before it can start to fulfill other functions such as self-expression’ (Phibbs & Young, 2005, p. 23). The stories of the home-making practices presented above clearly
suggest that occupants have no issue acquiring protection from their dwellings and in some stories, the interpretation of comfort is taken to another level.

The picture of a comfortable home, however, may appear elusive to many. This rings true for many urban poor in developed and developing regions, who are still struggling with inadequate housing. In many developing regions, substandard housing characterised by lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sewage disposal methods, exposure to vector-bourne diseases, crowding and harmful environments, just to name a few, potentially have adverse effects on health (for example, see Habib et al., 2009, p. 179; Krieger & Higgins, 2002; Rauh et al., 2008). Not only that, inadequate housing is also traced to the housing forms when housing fails to provide adequate protection to the occupants, physically and emotionally. With regard to the latter, the porosity of the home comes into play when parents with young children living in apartments are concerned about their children’s safety when they play outdoors without adult supervision (Easthope & Tice, 2011, p. 429). Similar effects are observed in Mee (2010) where parents do not really see medium density social housing neighbourhoods as ‘a good place to raise their children’, primarily due to the housing design, the heavy traffic in the area and the social influences there (pp. 207-208). In other words, it is not the dwelling that causes them to feel unsettled, rather it is what is happening outside the dwelling translating back into the sense of home within the dwelling. This is in fact, an important issue captured in this thesis as public housing estates in Sarawak are comprised of walk up blocks where children’s play areas are located on the ground floor. Mee (2007) found that while interviewees reported feeling safe and secure in their own units, there are times when they felt threatened (in their own units) by the incidents of crime and anti-social behaviour occurring in the public housing estates (p. 221). Adequate housing therefore, should serve as a site that enables people to feel restored, preserve their identity, relax, and maintain healthy bodily functions. In other words, for these functions to materialise, one’s housing should provide comfort (based on housing adequacy). Anything less is deficient. The importance of a comfortable home in family life is crucial; quoting Bartlett (1997, pp. 190-191):
If housing is adequate for family needs and provides parents with a sense of control, choice, and identity (in other words, if it functions as a home), it can support the capacity of parents to function in goal-oriented ways, and to rear children in keeping with their socially constructed beliefs and values, as members of the larger society. If, on the other hand, housing fails to meet this ideal, and instead limits choice and control, it may contribute, along with other factors in life, to stress and to reactive parenting behavior that is less likely to be responsive to children’s needs.

In the arguments presented above, the significance of a comfortable home translates into the material and imaginative aspects of housing. Materially, adequate and comfortable housing provides protection and safety; imaginatively, a comfortable home serves as a site for one to restore and recuperate after a day’s work. In this subsection, it is also found that the porosity of the home can potentially affect the meanings attached to home in relation to comfort. How does this knowledge translate into this thesis? This thesis seeks to answer the following question: ‘In what ways did tenants experience comfort in their former housing, and how did these experiences characterise the idea of comfort that they connect to public housing?’

### 2.5.2 Sense of home in the neighbourhood

This section largely uses the third component of critical geographies of home advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006). The component is ‘home is open and multi-scalar’. To recap, this component argues that the experience of home is not necessarily influenced by, and confined to the dwelling unit. There are two aspects of home in this component – the home is porous and the home is multi-scalar. These dimensions of home enable the thesis to capture tenants’ sense of home in their former neighbourhoods and observe how these experiences are reflected in public housing. It is worthy to note however, that the approach adopted in this thesis – to examine sense of home within the scale of the neighbourhood – is limiting the use of the construct (home is open and multi-scalar) to a much smaller spatial scale. In fact, people’s sense of home, according to Blunt and Dowling (2006) is influenced by events that occur on scales larger than the neighbourhood. This includes diaspora and imperialism (see Section 2.5 of this chapter).

The porosity of the home has been argued and implied in past studies (see Easthope, 2004; Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Massey, 1994; Mee, 2010). Massey (1994) argues that the openness of the home as a place, allows for movement, communication and social relations
occurring beyond it. In the context of a dwelling, the meaning of home therefore, is always recreated, renegotiated and taken beyond the four walls. This view echoes Fincher and Gooder (2007), who argue that given cultural diversity, household profiles, as well as lifestyle changes in the city, home should be seen as both inward and outward looking, especially when lifestyle changes in the urban setting involve modifying the practices of some activities that used to occur within a private sphere. Some of these include regular eating out or doing laundry in laundromats. As such, living in the city entails the dilution of public and private boundaries and largely reconstructs how the home is understood. Home then, is not separated from the public or the political worlds, but is shaped by them and vice versa (Blunt and Dowling, 2006).

The multi-scalar experiences of home purports that understanding home within the context of a dwelling unit, should take into account its immediate space – the neighbourhood. But, how does sense of home translate into the neighbourhood? The neighbourhood is an extension of the home utilised for social and personal purposes. This occurs through daily use of services in the areas e.g. shops, schools, medical clinics as well as interactions with other people. Forrest and Kearns (2001) see the neighbourhood as the site in which to carry out mundane routines and also for ‘ongoing repair work and normalization’ (p. 2127). Accordingly, these routines construct the neighbourhood as a familiar environment, offering comfort and security, which is very similar to the expectations of a home occurring inside the dwelling. Close routines and encounters in the neighbourhood lead to social cohesion and ‘through them we learn tolerance, cooperation, acquire a sense of social order and belonging’ (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2130). Therefore, the sense of home in the neighbourhood includes a sense of familiarity, constancy and belonging that occurs through regular interaction with place and people. (In this thesis, the term ‘place’ refers to significant locations that people attach meanings to, echoing the view that place is socially constructed (see Lewicka, 2011 and Easthope, 2004). The meanings given to places can be derived from favourable or unfavourable experiences. The examples of meaningful places include a residential park, city or a neighbourhood. This definition is used to explore the sense of belonging to place found in Section 4.4.2 and 5.4.2). Home in the neighbourhood also means adhering to social values and norms as a means to create social cohesion.
The multi-scalar experience of home as neighbourhood can be best explained using Kearns and Parkinson’s (2001) categorisation of the neighbourhood (see Table 2.1). This table outlines the functions and mechanisms of the neighbourhood and indicates how meanings of home are attached at the different neighbourhood scales. In this context, the sense of home in the neighbourhood is denoted by the sense of familiarity that people have with their home area, locality or urban district and region.

**Table 2.1: Scales of neighbourhood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of neighbourhood</th>
<th>Predominant Functions</th>
<th>Mechanism(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home area</td>
<td>Psycho-social benefits (e.g. identity and belonging)</td>
<td>Familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locality</td>
<td>Residential activities</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social status and position</td>
<td>Service provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Housing market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban district and region</td>
<td>Landscape of social and economic opportunities</td>
<td>Employment connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leisure interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kearns and Parkinson (2001, p. 2104)

Kearns and Parkinson (2001) define the home area as an area ‘within 5 – 10 minutes’ walk from one’s home’ and it is argued to be an important area from which to derive psycho-social benefits, for ‘relaxation and re-creation of self; making connections with others; fostering attachment and belonging; and demonstrating or reflecting one’s own values’ (p. 2103). The second scale, or the locality, may refer to a residential area. This is the level where residents are viewed with certain characteristics synonymous with the locality; insiders may want to relate to or detach from this given view. At this scale, often cited in the literature, is the stigma associated with public housing estates due to the high incidence of crime and poverty (Arthursone, 2004; Silver, 2011). Middle income neighbourhoods on the other hand, are perceived to be of better status. The third tier, the urban district and region, is seen ‘as a landscape of social and economic opportunities’ appreciated differently by people who may have different preferences or opportunities to access the services provided in this region (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001, p. 2104).

In the literature of place attachment, place scales influence the extent to which people feel they belong to place (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Lewicka, 2011). It is argued that people
tend to find themselves feeling most at home in their dwellings rather than in the
neighbourhood (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2010). The different senses of belonging
across place scales are due to the existence of clear property boundaries which allow for
more autonomy inside than outside the dwelling (Anton & Lawrence, 2014, p. 453). This
means, as we move out from the private area into semi-private and public space, the
amount of autonomy reduces and alters how home may be perceived as part of these
different zones. Cited in Hiscock et al. (2001), one homeowner from a public housing ‘right
to buy’ scheme in Scotland faced challenges to maintain the corridor outside his apartment
because other tenants did not share his aspiration to keep the shared area in good
condition. The corridor then, felt less homely to him than inside his apartment. A similar
threat can occur within the larger scale of the neighbourhood, as demonstrated in Noble
(2005), when acts of racism and incivility towards immigrants of Arab origins occurred in
Australia, especially after September 11. The events have caused some females in Australian
Muslim communities to feel uncomfortable appearing in public wearing the hijab or to
perform daily routines in areas once familiar to them, such as malls or the workplace.

Several factors shape people’s sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. Often cited is the
length of residence (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001) and this factor is associated with a greater
sense of familiarity and strong ties with people sharing the area. In this context,
homeownership is seen in a favorable light as it is often linked to rootedness, longer tenure
and hence, is associated with a more stable community. Strong cohesion is also exhibited in
public housing in Hong Kong, made possible by long-term tenancy allowing for prolonged
interactions amongst tenants who have resided in the estates almost permanently (Lee &
Yip, 2006). Similarly, the creation of a caring community is a ‘crucial element of
neighborhood belonging’ in Australian public housing (Mee, 2009, p. 849).

The presence of homogeneity is another factor that drives social cohesion, with the
argument that sense of belonging is stronger towards people who share similar
demographic profiles or behaviours (Vervoort, 2012), notably surrounding race, ethnicity
and social position. This is partly the reason why some participants from the Moving to
Opportunity program in the US returned to public housing or at the least, maintained their
former ties (Briggs et al., 2010), as they could relate better to other low income families
residing in the estates. The tendency to feel at home with homogeneity also means that
social isolation may be felt by people who are from a different race or social status (Stansfeld, 2006). While it is agreed amongst scholars that increased heterogeneity in the neighbourhood often leads to reduced contact and cohesion, Bwalya and Seethal (2014, p. 47) identify ‘truculent social conduct’ that profoundly undermines social cohesion. Within the context of their study in South Africa, racial diversity seems to play a less significant role in inducing atomisation in the neighbourhood.

There is much research comparing social cohesion and belonging in neighbourhoods of different levels of wealth. Low income households place greater dependence on their neighbours (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2130), while those in a better material position do not exhibit this trait (see Wilson-Doenges, 2000). In their study focusing on different social classes in Spain, Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) found that social attachment is stronger than place attachment (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001, p. 279). Other studies have found that compromised attachment to the neighbourhood is linked to a lower quality living environment (e.g. substandard housing, limited access to services, and high incidence of crime). But it is argued that these deprivations can be supplemented by stronger attachment to the local people, and in return social connections may enhance attachment to place (Livingston et al., 2010, p. 412). This is potentially achieved when cohesive communities work together to negotiate challenging living conditions entailed by deprivations (Kleinhans et al., 2010, p. 385). This relationship is not definite as other studies have found that the quality of the physical environment may negatively influence social support (Stansfeld, 2006). Accordingly, high turnover in residential areas, potentially resulting from dissatisfaction with place, reduces cohesion and therefore reduces local friendship ties. A lack of attachment is also observed where people are ‘trapped’ in an area (Hiscock et al., 2001) – suggesting that under certain circumstances, length of residence may not be a strong predictor of one’s commitment to place. More recent studies have also found that the perception of being ‘trapped’ or feeling ‘isolated’ should not be taken as people not maintaining relationships with their neighbours. In fact, it is evidenced in Rotterdam that ‘wanting to move away (driven by ethnic differences) and not feeling at home (in the neighborhood) can go together with maintained relations with neighbors’ (Van Eijk, 2012, p. 3021). In situations like this however, social cohesion is likely to be compromised.
In areas where social cohesion is observed, it is important to mention the presence of informal social control to curb crime and deviance in the neighbourhood (Silver & Miller, 2004). This can be seen where adults act as monitors of children’s activities through discouraging negative behaviours and encouraging behaviours and goals accepted within the norms of the community (Higgit & Memken, 2001, p. 33). As it is argued that this trait is likely observed in stable and cohesive communities, we can also perhaps assume that informal social control is weak in neighbourhoods with high turnover, best exemplified by the public housing estates in Sarawak. In this context, Brown et al. (2003)’s work is useful to demonstrate the ways in which certain characteristics of a neighbourhood or block lead to incivilities in the area. In brief, they show that incivilities tend to occur in areas that appear to be less protected by the people, than in the more protected areas. This is akin to the notion of ‘street surveillance’ advanced by Jacobs (1961, p. 89). Another important, related aspect is the role of a cohesive community in governing the neighbourhood in the absence of efficacy by responsible authorities. While it is suggested in the literature that a cohesive community could fill in the gaps (Bardo, 1984), what can we expect from a community located in temporary public rental housing when it comes to crime control?

Using the idea that home is multi-scalar, this thesis seeks to unpack the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood in relation to tenants’ housing histories. Specifically, it asks ‘How does the sense of home occur in the public housing neighbourhood for tenants who used to formerly reside in parental homes in traditional villages, the commercial areas or the squatter settlements?’ The above accounts provide the types of answers I seek to furnish in this thesis. We should expect fresh information in terms of how the sense of home translates in the different neighbourhoods (past and current housing alike) given the different social and housing contexts in Sarawak.

2.6 Housing Governance and the Sense of Home

This section reviews the literature on the governance of two housing tenures, private rental properties and public housing, with an aim to examine the extent to which these governance practices influence people’s sense of home in these tenures. (There is also extensive work examining meanings attached to home in residential care, but this living arrangement is not included in the scope of this thesis). The focus on the two aforementioned tenures is important in the context of this thesis, given the less regulated
private rental sector as well as temporary public rental housing in Sarawak. The governance of these kinds of housing potentially changes the power relations between the tenants and the landlords or housing managers and in return, affects how the households experience home in their dwellings.

Highly regulated private rental sectors are mostly found in English-speaking and northern European regions (Hulse et al., 2011; Priemus & Dieleman, 2002; Scanlon et al., 2015). In these regions, occupants in private rental dwellings are ‘protected’ by tenancies acts or legislation that governs the sector. For example in Australia, the rights of private rental tenants are governed through residential tenancies legislation that cover various aspects of secure occupancy. These include access to housing (e.g. bonds, affordability, rent increase and service charges); the state of comfort and standard of repair; independent access to power and utility in the dwelling; as well as landlord-tenant relations (including fixed term leases and the ways in which termination may take effect) (Hulse et al., 2011, pp. 43-44). In the Netherlands and Germany, the rent is fixed with little opportunity for increase. Generally speaking, having regulations to protect tenants’ rights enables the attainment of homeliness through the autonomy that tenants have to reside in and to utilise the dwelling unit (Easthope, 2014). Certainly the rights to use the dwelling may be less than that of a homeowner but this does not mean one cannot feel ‘at home’ in private rental accommodation. Following this, I argue that by having regulations, although some aspects are perceived to create housing insecurity (take for example in Australia, there are allowances for rent increases and for no-gounds lease termination), it is potentially better than not having regulations in place. To illustrate my point, we shall observe how an unregulated private rental market in Malaysia (see Sufian, 2012) affects the ways in which home is experienced by low income households in this Sarawak case study.

In public housing, one of the two aspects of governance that affect tenants’ sense of home is maintenance. It is commonly known that public housing units around the world are in a state of disrepair due to disinvestment (Hayward, 1996; Silver, 2011). In England for example, managerial reforms were made to reduce public expenses on public housing. This includes selling off better quality public housing units to sitting tenants while leaving deteriorating units in the rental stock. The move entails welfare deprivation of low income households resulting from the shrinking number of public housing units available for rent
(Walker, 2001, p. 690). A lack of repair causes substandard quality in public housing, and this can bring health risks to families (Bashir, 2002, p. 735). Apart from these matters, little is known about how disinvestment affects tenants’ sense of home. Presumably, tenants’ sense of home is affected by a less responsive management, failing to carry out repairs. For example, when the needed repairs are major but unattended, feelings of home could be affected by the fear that one’s family’s safety could be harmed by the defects; or their routines changed. On the other hand, the situation may inculcate other ingenious home-making practices.

Another aspect of housing governance that may make or break a home is the practice of enforcement. More often than not, the practice of enforcement undermines secure occupancy amongst low income families when these practices are follow-ups of a breach of rental contracts. In many cases, the practices result in evictions. In America, apart from the normal criteria that may lead to eviction from public housing (rent arrears, anti-social behaviour), the reasons for evictions can also be linked to the actions of third parties. According to Truman (2003), tenants could also be evicted for regularly hosting visitors who abuse drugs, even when host is not aware of the behaviour or is not a drug user themselves. In her article, she cited how a son’s confession of drug offences had cost the eviction of his mother whom he visited regularly, from public housing. In a similar vein, Hunter and Nixon (2001) reported how women often become victims of eviction for anti-social behaviours caused by their family members. According to Hartman and Robinson (2003) the process of eviction may involve intimidation and violence, unless occupants leave the residence voluntarily. Capturing the modes of eviction processes across different types of landlords in America, the procedures cited include termination of utilities, serving of notices, possession of personal property, locking up units and the use of ‘removal agents’ to force tenants out of the properties. Although public housing authorities are required to provide relocation options for families prior to eviction, the procedures involved in these prior and post evictions would have caused a lot of anxiety for vulnerable families, knowing that their housing future from then on was going to be very uncertain (see Bassuk, 1988; DeOllos, 1997). Again, some scholars have established that evictees are not helpless victims of their fate; rather they can be ingenious in developing survival skills to negotiate the harsh reality of their housing situations. Desmond (2012) found that evictees tend to form disposable ties
with strangers to get by. For example, there are cases where evictees have quickly made arrangements with the new tenants who took over their units by offering them (new tenants) use of their furniture or belongings in exchange for shelter in the said unit. The ties are often terminated after an evicted tenant has managed to get their own place.

In this study, since I am also dealing with families who are potentially facing eviction or the ending of their leases, I am seeking to include the ways in which households negotiate certain measures to stay housed in public housing. It is worthy to note that the practices of enforcement in the Sarawak context differ from those provided in this literature review. Specifically, the maximum lease, or the exit policy, that is made known to tenants is not always enforced. Similarly, tenants exhibiting anti-social behaviours are not necessarily evicted (although this condition is stated in the lease contract) unless they default on their rental payments. In other words, the legal aspects of housing security exemplified by the tenancy contract of six years maximum, may not be the absolute determinant of length of occupancy in public housing. There is a need to look into the context and local practices that may strengthen or threaten sense of home in a regulated tenure like public housing. In this sense, and as mentioned in Section 2.2, Hulse and Milligan (2014)’s framework is useful to provide insights to this situation in Sarawak.

2.7 Conceptual Framework of this Thesis

This section illustrates and summarises the different components that construct the conceptual framework of this thesis.

*Figure 2.2: Conceptual framework of the thesis*

- The life-course approach to housing behaviour/options
- Critical geographies of home
- Sense of home in former housing
- Sense of home in public housing
As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the research framework is predominantly developed using two bodies of work that are central to contemporary and multi-disciplinary housing studies. The two perspectives are the life-course approach to housing behaviour and the insights of the critical geographies of home, as shown in Figure 2.2. In brief, Figure 2.2 shows that the life-course perspective, together with the critical geographies of home, enable the researcher to interrogate the effects of certain housing circumstances on people’s sense of home. Such examination occurs for both past housing and public housing. This framework further argues that the meanings attributable to certain experiences or sense of home in people’s former housing in fact, shape their sense of home in public housing in specific ways. Figure 2.3 shows the details of the framework, by associating the terms and concepts discussed earlier, into the different components of the framework.

**Figure 2.3: Terms and concepts associated with different components of the framework**
2.8 Conclusion

This thesis seeks to understand tenants’ experiences of home in Sarawak’s temporary public rental housing in relation to their housing histories. It is a contribution to the current body of literature and knowledge, as this thesis is taken from a context where housing is affordable yet insecure. The lack of housing security may have little effect on individuals’ experiences of home in public housing if their housing histories are a stronger determinant of their sense of home than the notion of housing security.

The conceptual framework used to examine the effects of housing histories on the sense of home is developed using the insights of two bodies of work; they are the critical geographies of home and the life-course approach to the study of housing behaviours. It is worthy to note that the Sarawak tenants’ housing histories are largely characterised by housing deficits entailed by their different, past, housing arrangements. In this framework, the examination of tenants’ housing outcomes in the past (often in deprived housing conditions) is performed using the life-course approach to housing behaviours. The investigation of tenants’ sense of home in both former and public housing (control, privacy and comfort) are framed using insights from the three components of the critical geographies of home advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006). ‘Home as material and imaginative’ explores the aspects of control, privacy and comfort in housing; ‘nexus between home, power and identity’ captures the distribution of control in a household; the porosity of home affects the sense of comfort at home; and home as multi-scalar is explored using the notion of a neighbourhood as an extension of the dwelling. The ways in which governance affects sense of home, largely attributable to the sense of control felt by tenants, is observed using power relations in certain housing tenures. Another important aspect explored in this thesis is the significance of human agency or ingenuity in negotiating their housing circumstances.

Based on the discussions provided in this chapter, not only does the thesis bring the significance of housing histories to the fore, it also introduces the meanings attached to home from a different context where family values are perceived differently from the English-speaking regions often highlighted in the literature. This is compounded by challenging housing circumstances characterised by poverty, limited housing assistance in a non-welfare economy, lack of housing options and oftentimes, high cultural expectations in
Sarawak. These challenges however, do not stop tenants from making trade-offs, strategising and using their ingenuity to make a home in their past or present housing. Themes derived from past studies do not always translate directly into this Sarawak case study, therefore this thesis is expected to contribute substantially to the literature of home. Furthermore, judging from the current scholarly inclination of housing studies in Malaysia, this study will push the boundaries of the current priorities – which often lead to investigating the social aspects of housing with reference to measuring households’ satisfaction and the physical adequacy of low-cost and public housing.
Chapter 3
Methodology of Methods: Examining Sense of Home in Tenants’ Former Housing and Public Housing

3.1 Introduction

The ways in which housing histories shape sense of home have attracted little inquiry in past scholarly work. In this thesis, I bring together two bodies of work – the life-course approach to housing behaviour and insights from critical geographies of home – to make sense of how the two concepts (housing histories and sense of home) interact. In fact, the potential of this inquiry was highlighted by Lewin (2001) in her proposal to examine how elderly immigrants perceive home. Prior to Lewin’s recommendation, the connection between the two was succinctly addressed in the work of Tomas and Dittmar (1995), focusing (as I noted in the previous chapter) on how homeless women attach meanings to home. Given the scarcity of scholarship in this area, this thesis contributes to knowledge by using the stories of low income households who are currently residing in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak, Malaysia.

This chapter describes the methodology and methods of the study and is organised as follows. The first part of the chapter covers the research aims. It then turns to the research framework – focusing on the research methodology, site selection, participant selection, data collection and data analysis. The latter sections in this chapter discuss the quality criteria of this thesis, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study.

3.2 Research Aims

This thesis aims to capture tenants’ sense of home in public housing and the ways in which these experiences are mediated by their housing histories. It is worthy of note that tenants’ housing histories are largely characterised by the deficits experienced in their former housing. One important contribution of this thesis is to examine the trade-offs that low income families have had to make in their former and current housing, as their sense of home is produced.

As explained in Chapter Two, this study focuses on notions of control and autonomy, privacy and comfort, and the sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, to examine how a sense of
home is experienced. Lived experiences of home are context-specific and how people feel at home is a social phenomenon mediated by external influences (Perkins et al., 2008, p. 36). That is to say, how tenants experience control and privacy, for example in public housing may differ (see Easthope et al., 2015) and the varying experiences are influenced by tenants’ housing histories. The relative ways in which a ‘sense of home’ materialises requires this concept to be critically examined using approaches such as those articulated in the preceding chapter.

Thus, the aim of the research is to investigate how people experience a sense of home in Sarawak public housing, and the research questions that have been used to guide the study and meet its aims have been operationalised using the research framework that follows.

3.3 The Research Framework

3.3.1 Case study methodology

Given that a sense of home is a socially mediated phenomenon, its examination in the context of this thesis is ideally nested within a qualitative research tradition, which allows the capturing of rich and thick descriptions in order to answer the research questions posed. Questioning different interviewees about their lived experiences of home in former housing as well as in public housing, and their interaction with people and place in both settings, will help to make sense of how their sense of home is produced. The suitability of qualitative research to examine the ways in which home is experienced is reinforced in Perkins et al. (2008, p. 36):

Home-related research requires an understanding of the subjective experiences of housing and neighborhood and the social, economic and regulatory forces that influence those experiences. A qualitative methodology is very appropriate for such research because it allows researchers to capture and combine elements of subjective everyday experience and wider structural considerations.

I decided a case study methodology best suited the aims of my qualitative research inquiry. In line with the questioning posed in this thesis, the case study approach is useful to answer questions that imply processes such as ‘how’ and ‘why’ (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Researchers who employ the case study methodology observe a phenomenon ‘within a real-life context’ where they study and may interact with the people whose lives are being
observed (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This procedure allows for the accessing of people’s thoughts, feelings and desires in a non-intimidating environment (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009).

The deductive and inductive modes of inquiry employed in this study require the combination of different data collection procedures. In short, there are two stages of data collection involved in this thesis. The inductive approach that occurred during the earliest stage of data collection (scoping) set to answer one question: do tenants feel ‘at home’ in temporary public housing, to which the answer is mostly, ‘Yes’. In fact, their sense of homeliness in public housing does not concur with the popular assumption that tenure longevity is necessary to construct people’s sense of belonging to their dwelling. Thus, the findings from the scoping stage unsettle this assumption prevalent in the literature on home. In a later stage of the research, I probed further to ask, ‘What makes tenants feel at home in public housing?’, in which I found that it was tenants’ housing histories that led them, for the most part, to positive lived experiences of home in public housing. In this sense, the strength of an inductive process in establishing a way forward to explore an inadequately understood phenomenon (in this case, feeling homely in public housing despite the lack of tenure longevity) was clearly demonstrated at this stage of data collection (see Merriam, 2009, p. 15).

With the connection between housing histories and a sense of home being established in this way, the next step was to explore if the data were ‘consistent with (this) prior assumption’ (Thomas, 2006, p. 238); that is, does the data further demonstrate the link between housing histories and the sense of home? In particular, the data were analysed to explore the ways in which control and autonomy, privacy and comfort, and sense of belonging to the neighbourhood for tenants in public housing, correspond to the different lived experiences of home in tenants’ former housing. In other words, I explore how different senses of ‘homeliness’ or ‘unhomeliness’ in public housing are mediated by tenants’ past experiences in parental homes, private rentals, squatter settlements and workers’ quarters. This later stage of data collection and data analysis procedures illustrates the presence of a deductive approach that importantly shapes the research design of this thesis. The inductive and deductive research processes are shown in Figure 3.1 below.
The use of a case study approach is appropriate for my thesis for two reasons. First, it is well suited because the focus of the study is ‘bounded subjects’ who are experiencing a similar phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). In other words, the unit of analysis in this thesis is a group of current tenants who are experiencing a sense of home in the Sarawak public housing. Second, the case study approach is suitable for studies that need to capture narratives from ‘complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). It is important to note that the case study approach is not directed towards producing generalisable research findings rather it aims to produce in-depth descriptions of a phenomenon within a bounded system. As such, the size of the sample in the case study methodology is expected to be smaller than in other methodologies, given its general nature of non-representativeness. The data collection procedures also align with smaller samples, because they emphasise the production of rich and dense responses to the research questions. Although it is generally expected that within the qualitative research tradition findings are not generalisable, I find that the main contribution of this thesis – that housing histories significantly influence how
people experience sense of home – may also be relevant in studies of home-making processes in different contexts.

3.3.2 Site selection and the social context

We now turn to the rationale for selecting the site of this case study. The case study is located in Kuching, Sarawak. There are two reasons for this selection. First, the diverse ethnicities and cultures found in this region make it profoundly different from Peninsular Malaysia. To date, most published studies on housing in Malaysia are taken from the Kuala Lumpur or Selangor regions. As noted in the previous chapter, I intend to add diversity to the current materials on housing in Malaysia, not only in terms of topic but also through the addition of geographical, social and cultural dimensions. The second reason for site selection focuses on aspects of practicality and accessibility. As I am a local in Kuching and familiar with the area, I found it more convenient to locate the study there and to obtain and mobilise resources for data collection within a limited timeframe. This practical aspect allowed me to carry out certain tasks more effectively, as elaborated in Section 3.3.3 focusing on data collection. I note that there are six public rental housing estates located in Sarawak. This thesis focuses on the three earliest and most established estates; all located in Kuching. The other three estates were excluded either because they were located outside Kuching or due to the estates being vacant at the time of data collection.

The three selected estates are Demak Laut, which consists of 256 rental units, Sri Wangi with 200 rental units and Dahlia, the largest estate, with 816 rental units (their locations are given in Figure 1.1). Each estate comprises four-storey walk up flats, with different designs and configurations unique to each estate. Demak Laut is the only estate offering three-bedroom and one-bathroom units hence, the rent is cheaper (RM100.00 or AUD33.00 per month), while the other estates offer three-bedroom and two-bathroom apartments entailing more expensive rental property (RM150.00 or AUD50.00 per month). All three estates are located in mixed development regions. However, Dahlia and Sri Wangi are situated closer to the urban center, while Demak Laut is located in the peri-urban, industrial-dominated region of Sarawak. All estates are found in areas where tenants can access social and commercial services. Households earning between RM650 – RM3000 or AUD217.00 – AUD1000.00 per month are eligible to apply for public housing however, priority is given to families residing in squatter settlements.
The paragraphs that follow briefly explain how the distribution of public housing is carried out in Sarawak, beginning with the racial and wealth distribution, and followed by how tenants are distributed across the three public housing estates. Kuching, being the largest and most developed township in Sarawak, has a host of diverse cultural groups. Sarawak is home to 28 ethnicities, with Iban being the largest indigenous group (30.3 percent) followed by the Malay (22.9 percent) and Chinese (23.3 percent) (Ahmad Hariza, 2003, pp. 12-13). Other indigenous groups forming part of the population include Bidayuh, Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Lun Bawang, Bhuket and Punan Bah (Yong & Pang, 2015, p. 18). The population configuration is very different from that found in Peninsular Malaysia, where the Malay group forms 63.1 percent of the population, followed by the Chinese (25.0 percent) and Indian (7.0 percent) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011, p. 5). The more balanced ethnic composition in Sarawak is often cited as the reason the state has better experiences of racial harmony in comparison to other states in Malaysia. In terms of wealth distribution, the incidence of urban poverty in Sarawak was ranked third highest in Malaysia in 2014 (Economic Planning Unit, 2017b), with the highest incidence of poverty occurring amongst the Malay and indigenous populations (Economic Planning Unit, 2017a).

Out of 11 blocks in Dahlia, only two are designated for non-Muslims while the rest are for Malay or Muslim residents. Sri Wangi estate is fully dedicated to the Malay or Muslim population. Ethnic mix is observed in Demak Laut, where 54 percent of the tenants are Iban, 32 percent are Malay, and the rest are Chinese (8 percent) or other indigenous groups. There are two issues I would like to note here; first, while the Malay and/or Muslim residents and the indigenous groups are likely to be the eligible groups to enter public housing, the practices of distribution are in fact, biased towards the Malay or Muslim population. This issue is not examined in this thesis. Second, there seems to be racial segregation here, in the two estates for which entry is limited (Dahlia and Sri Wangi), which does not seem to reflect the racial tolerance and harmony in this state. However, we should not jump to conclusions before listening to people’s experiences on the ground. Therefore,

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According to Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, ‘Malay’ refers to a person who embraces Islam, conforms to the Malay customs, habitually speaks the Malay language, with at least one of the parents are Malay (The Commissioner of Law Revisions Malaysia, 2010, p. 153). Malay, together with the other indigenous groups, are known as Bumiputera (sons of the soil) and they form close to 70 percent of Malaysia’s population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).
ethnic segregation and how it affects people’s sense of belonging to public housing is another important area highlighted and examined in this thesis.

### 3.3.3 Data collection

Moving on, we shall learn the ways in which the research participants were recruited for this thesis. In brief, the interviewees were recruited selectively based on the information given in a survey conducted prior to the selection. A total of 54 heads of household or their spouses (if aged above 21) were recruited for a semi-structured interview. However, only the information gathered from 41 current tenants was used to form the stories in this thesis. This number (41 interviewees) satisfies the requirement for qualitative studies, whereby a sample size of five to 25 is sufficient in studies employing in-depth interviews (Polkinghorne, cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 61). More importantly, the sample recruited reflects variations in terms of housing history, gender, ethnicity and household types. A sample which included this demographic diversity was necessary given the research expectation that experiences of home are different between households characterised by these varying dimensions.

Three officials from the Sarawak Housing Corporation (hereafter SHC) were interviewed to provide their views on the approaches taken to manage the public housing facility and the rationale for employing certain approaches in housing management. One official provided input at the policy decision level while another provided information from a housing management perspective. The third officer shared information on how enforcements are practiced on the ground. Their inputs gave me insight on policy expectations, and how these result in practices that can affect people’s lived experiences of home in public housing. The interviews with the officials allowed me to triangulate information gathered from the tenants. Similarly, the data gathered through the interviews with tenants are used to compare with information provided by the officials. Overall, responses from 44 interviewees, comprising 41 current tenants and three SHC officials, were included in this thesis.

The data collection procedures of this thesis involve three sequential stages. These stages are elaborated in detail in this section. This comprehensive explanation of the procedures is to ensure future researchers, where applicable, are able to replicate the research
procedures elsewhere. Replicability is an important criterion for ensuring quality in qualitative research (Bryman et al., 2008).

i. **Scoping**

The first stage of data collection comprised of a pilot stage designed to make sense of the public rental housing policy and its implementation. Prior to this stage of data collection, very little was known about Sarawak public rental housing policy and its implementation, particularly in light of the maximum six-year lease given to tenants. I spoke to different parties to gain their insights about the policy’s implementation and also to explore how tenants are affected by the exit policy.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were then conducted with different individuals in the following breakdown: 13 former tenants, 4 current tenants and 3 SHC officials. The interviews took place between November 2013 and January 2014. The SHC officials were interviewed in their workplaces. They gave their views on the rationale for the public rental housing policy and how the policy context translates into the management of the facilities, particularly in the enforcement and maintenance of the estates. The interview schedule for the officers is provided in Appendix I. Former tenants, whose contact details were provided by SHC, were interviewed either at their current homes or in public places convenient to them. Current tenants were approached on the public housing estates. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture both former and current tenants’ lived experiences of home in public housing and how the experiences compare to their current and former housing. I also conducted observations to record how home-making practices occur physically and socially in the home area and in the neighbourhood of their current residences.

During the interview, I was quick to realise that the policy that requires tenants to leave public housing after the six-year mark, was not enforced. This development has created more uncertainties in the public housing tenure because on the one hand, tenants can continue staying in public housing but on the other, there is always the question as to how long they can continue occupying the facility. As such, I needed to refine the research topic to reflect the current situation of how public rental housing policy was being implemented. In particular, the preliminary research question with which I began
the study required refinement, from ‘How do tenants feel at home in public housing knowing that they need to leave after six years?’ to ‘To what extent tenants feel at home in public housing given the uncertain implementation of the exit policy?’

In brief, this pilot stage of data collection, targeted to understand the current policy implementation, was beneficial in three ways. First, this stage provided the opportunity for me to create rapport and build trust with the occupants in the three estates through regular visits and encounters with them. Second, the information gathered was used to refine the thesis’s topic. Third, the themes derived from the findings were used to develop an interview schedule for the next stage of data collection. The major categories are: tenants’ lived experiences of home in their former housing, and tenants’ lived experiences of home in public housing. Under each major category, the following themes were included: how material experiences of home took place inside the rental unit; how people experience home in their neighbourhood; and how practices of governance have effects on people’s sense of home in public housing.

After the scoping stage, when an interview schedule had been developed, three pilot interviews were conducted with several Malaysian housewives residing in Glenroy, a northern suburb in Victoria. The suburb attracts a good number of Malaysian families who seek ties and bonding with other Malaysian families. The purpose of the pilot interview was to test the flow and the clarity of the interview schedule. Although the pilot interviewees were neither poor nor experiencing housing crises, they were still useful interviewees given their ability to produce comparisons between their lived experiences of home in Malaysia and in Melbourne. The finalised interview schedule is attached in Appendix II.

**ii. Survey**

The main purpose of the second stage of data collection was to develop a sampling framework for the purpose of recruiting potential respondents in the third stage of data collection. This step was necessary due to the absence of baseline information that could be used to guide the recruitment of interviewees following the criteria identified in this study. That is, there must be a good variation of housing histories, household types, ethnicities and gender representation in the sample selection.
Between May and June 2014, a two-page self-administered questionnaire (see Appendix III) was distributed to current tenants in the Demak Laut, Sri Wangi and Dahlia estates. The samples of who received the questionnaires were selected systematically, with the number of the interviewees in the sample proportionate to the number of units in each estate. Table 3.1 presents the distribution of the targeted and actual respondents recruited in the different estates. Note in the table that the number of residents recruited in Dahlia is lower than expected. This is probably attributable to the substantial number of vacant units in the estate. Nevertheless, this shortage is compensated for by the higher number recruited in the other two estates.

Table 3.1: Distribution of survey participants by estates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public housing estates</th>
<th>Number of rental units</th>
<th>Number of targeted respondents</th>
<th>Number of recruited respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dahlia</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Wangi</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demak Laut</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1272</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on survey with public housing residents (May – June 2014), Kuching.

There are four sections in the questionnaire. The first section asks for a demographic profile of the household including age, ethnicity and gender of the household head, followed by the details of the household members including their age, gender and their relationships to the head of the household. The second section seeks information on two previous housing situations, including the location and name of the area, the tenure and length of the residence, and with whom the respondents resided. The additional housing history information is important in case there are respondents who happened to reside briefly, say, less than three months, in the former housing immediately before public housing. In such cases, the former housing with the longer tenure will be used as the criterion for selecting a respondent. The third section includes respondents’ length of residence in public housing, with the aim of observing if time affects people’s sense of home in public housing. Finally, respondents were asked to include their contact details (name, address, phone number) in the questionnaire if they agreed to be interviewed in
the final stage of data collection scheduled between July and September 2014. The data were analysed using Statistical Software for Social Sciences and the results are presented in Table 3.2 and Table 3.3.

Before this data collection took place, the respondents were given a copy of the Plain Language Statement (PLS) (see Appendix IV) translated into Malay. The nature and the purpose of the survey were explained to them. Respondents also signed a consent form (see Appendix V) agreeing to participate in the survey and they were made aware of their rights before signing the forms. On average, they spent about ten to fifteen minutes in completing the survey form. Each respondent was given a souvenir as a token of appreciation. This stage was treated as an introductory session for potential interviewees. Although rapport was not directly built by the researcher herself (the surveys were administered and collected by local assistants), it was important that potential interviewees had some sense of the project that could be used to help with communication in Stage Three.
**Table 3.2: Demographic and tenure profiles of samples in Kuching’s public housing estates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 – 50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 – 60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear family</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent family</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of tenancy in public housing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than one year</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 years</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 years and more</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on survey with public housing residents (May – June 2014), Kuching.
Based on Table 3.1 and 3.2, the following was expected in the third stage of data collection: that a majority of respondents would be recruited from the Dahlia estate, most respondents would be female and many of them would be housewives, a significant proportion of respondents would be in their 30s and 40s, most interviewees would be from the Malay group – in fact they are over-represented in the facilities due to how public housing is allocated. More interviewees would be expected from nuclear families – this distribution is attributed to the priority given to married applicants with families for residence in public housing. The distribution of respondents according to their length of tenancy in public housing is rather diverse; figures are not available from the SHC to show if this matches the actual population configuration in the estates. Nevertheless, a sample with a higher number of interviewees approaching or exceeding the six-year maximum tenure in public housing was expected. With regard to household types, the concentration of nuclear and extended families in public housing is found to be higher than the figure reported for urban Sarawak – which is 57 percent and 27 percent respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013, p. 135). Unfortunately, in the aforementioned report, single parent households are not accounted for separately; rather, they are grouped together with nuclear households. It is predicted that the over-representation of nuclear or extended families in public housing overshadows the presence of single parent households (in this study, mostly headed by single mothers) in the facilities in Kuching. Having said this, the low representation of single parent households in this sample could be linked to how the survey was conducted. For example, most single mothers may have been out at work when the survey took place and therefore, were not included in the sample.
### Table 3.3: Length of residence in former housing arrangements (years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of residence in former housing</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental homes (23.4 years)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rental (4.6 years)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squatter settlements (18.5 years)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ quarters (8.9 years)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner occupation (17.1 years)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing responses</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>207</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on survey with public housing residents (May – June 2014), Kuching.

The varieties of former housing arrangements shown in Table 3.3 reflect the housing options for the poor in Kuching. From this table, it is expected that most interviewees would be former occupants of parental homes and private rentals. The lower representation of households who used to reside in the squatter settlements, is potentially attributable to certain practices in public housing policy, for example, applicants must be within a certain income bracket to be eligible for public housing and many squatter households earn less than the value indicated in the bracket. Also, squatters’ relocation into public housing is voluntary. The low response amongst the former squatter settlers could also be linked to the inadequacy of data collection. Nevertheless, this result signaled a rich variety of data waiting to be revealed in the later stage of data collection. The emerging demographic patterns shown in the survey results also signal the need to adopt other approaches to locate a variety of respondents to ensure diversity in the sample. In particular, I employed snowball sampling to recruit more single parent households in this study.

Before moving on to the third stage of data collection, the kinds of former housing arrangements experienced by respondents (i.e. before moving to the estates) is explored in more depth.
Parental home. One important characteristic of the parental home is that it housed multigenerational families. It is common to see more than ten members residing under the same roof.

The parental homes captured in this survey are largely found in traditional Malay villages, which are located near Kuching city. Many of these villages are congested (see Figure 3.2). Over time, more houses have been built or existing houses extended to meet the needs of growing families until no more space is left in the villages to include more dwellings. Some parental homes are also found in low-cost residential areas located further out from Kuching city.

Private rental. Private rental properties are commonly found in low-cost residential areas, traditional villages and in shop-houses. The quality of the cheaper rental dwellings in traditional villages are generally poorer than those found in other locations. There are two types of private rental – rooming facilities often found in shop-houses and self-contained units in other locations including shop-houses. The rentals in the shop-houses are usually more expensive than those found in low-cost residential areas or villages. Figure 3.3 shows a row of shop-houses in a commercial area in Demak Laut. The rental units are located on the higher floors and households have good access to commercial and social services in these areas.
Squatter settlement. There are three squatter settlements whose past residents are included in this survey – Siol Kandis, Sungai Tapang and Sungai Apong. They are home to indigenous ethnic groups particularly the Iban and Bidayuh who are mostly Christians. The settlements are normally located in secluded areas and households often find it challenging to access commercial and social services outside the settlements. The squatter settlements are characterised by dilapidated housing conditions, limited access to clean drinking water or electricity, no access to modern latrines and unregulated surrounding areas that often harbor vector-borne diseases. Most occupants’ claim that they ‘own’ the houses they reside in and this signals an unconventional means to own a home.

**Owner-occupation.** In this study, owner-occupied homes are found in traditional villages and low-cost housing estates or in the squatter settlements. Owner-occupation in the squatter settlements is purposely excluded from this category because they are included in the squatter category. In many cases, respondents left their home in the villages for various reasons e.g. the houses are no longer habitable or the land plot was washed away. For homeowners who purchased their homes through the conventional market, they may have lost their former homes through repossession. Low-cost homes are often in the form of terraced housing or blocks of flats (see Figure 3.5).
Workers’ quarters. There are two categories of workers’ quarters included in this study; those provided by government or semi-government agencies and those provided by private companies for their lower rank employees. In general, the quality of the former is much better than the latter. Government or semi-government quarters are often in the form of self-contained accommodation (see Figure 3.6). Private employees, with or without families, may be housed in rooming facilities or hostels. In the rooming facilities or hostels (see Figure 3.7), there are a mix of different household types and the arrangement may create discomfort amongst families with children, especially when they have to share the living space with young male workers. Employees may only reside in the facility as long as they are employed with the organisation owning it. Rent is subsidised and usually below the market rate. On average, longer tenure is reported in government or semi-government quarters (11.5 years) than in private workers’ quarters (6.5 years), suggesting better job security or housing security experienced by government or semi-government employees.

Figure 3.5: Low income families can own a home through low-cost housing programs in Sarawak. These pictures show the typical forms of housing available under these programs. Because of the shortage of supply, applicants may wait for years on a waiting list before they are offered a unit.

Figure 3.6: This figure shows a block of government or semi-government quarters. This basic design consists of six units of three-bedroom apartments.
It is important to note that parental homes are likely to house extended families, and the other housing types are mostly resided in by nuclear families. The different household configurations as well as the complex contexts of people’s housing histories hint at the diverse lived experiences of home waiting to be explored, organised and critically positioned within the current body of knowledge. This can only be made possible through the acquiring of rich and detailed descriptions of people’s senses of home, using semi-structured interviews and observations.

iii. **In-depth interview**

In the third stage of data collection, a total of 41 interviewees were recruited through the following approaches: 28 interviewees from the list generated using the sample survey, nine interviewees through a snowball sampling method, and four current tenants contacted in the first stage were re-interviewed to capture additional information needed for the study. The distribution by demographic and household profile suggests diversity in the sample size (see Table 3.4), which is an important goal of this research design. Note, the uneven distribution may also reflect the uneven practice of public housing distribution. More details of the respondents’ profiles can be found in Appendix VI. Individual respondents’ demographic profiles are provided in Appendix VI but this information is far from sufficient to represent their life stories within the context.

*Figure 3.7: Private company workers’ quarters found on a construction site. These dwellings are used by single people or families. (Left) Building exterior. (Right) A look from the inside. In this building, each room is equipped with a washroom and kitchen. Note this is one of the better quality workers’ quarters. Others are likely to be rooming facilities with shared kitchens and washrooms.*
of their housing. More in-depth coverage of their stories is presented in Chapter Four and Five.

**Table 3.4: Demographic and housing profile of interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (Melanau/Chinese/Orang Ulu)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Former housing arrangements</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental home</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rental – self-contained unit</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rental – rooming facility</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squatter settlements</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ quarters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household types</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear household</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended household</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (mother) household</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person household</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on interviews with public housing residents, July – September 2014, Kuching.
In this stage of the study, two qualitative research methods were employed, namely semi-structured interviewing and observation. The adoption of different methods allowed me to explore emerging issues from various viewpoints and to corroborate different evidence, increasing the trustworthiness of this study (Yin, 2009). Before discussing the ways the interviews and the observations were conducted, I need to first address how I approached the respondents. Interviewees’ contact details were obtained using two means; through details provided in sample survey forms and through a snowball sampling method where interviewees gave contacts details of other tenants whose criteria would add diversity to the sample. I contacted prospective interviewees to arrange for semi-structured interviews at a place convenient to them. Almost all interviewees agreed to meet at their homes. Only a handful decided to meet at their workplaces or in the common area in the estates. Indeed, the sample survey performed in stage two made it easier to recruit respondents, given their prior knowledge about the project and due to their awareness that they may be contacted for a further interview.

Face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the respondents, guided by a list of open-ended questions. Each interview session lasted between one and a half to two hours. Although there was a pre-determined set of questions developed for the purpose of the interview, the flow of the interview was fluid rather than following the sequence provided in the interview schedule too strictly. Such flexibility is important to ensure an uninterrupted flow of information. Bryman (2001, p. 313) noted that the flexibility of qualitative interviews may ‘respond to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of the interviews’. Therefore, the researcher needs to be adaptive to the different directions that the interview may take, at the same time managing the session to solicit adequate input for the study.

During the interview, respondents provided facts or opinions about their lived experiences of home in both former and current housing. It is important to note that the interviews were conducted in the Malay language and, as far as I am aware, there is no word equivalent to ‘home’ in the Malay vocabulary. The closest word to describe ‘home’
is ‘rumah’, which means ‘house’ in Malay. Therefore, as I needed the interviewees to talk about their sense of ‘home’ (in the context of this study, it is a house to which feelings are attached), I used a popular Malay proverb ‘rumahku syurgaku’ – which literally means ‘my house my haven’ – to draw interviewees’ narratives on the topic. In most cases, respondents reconstructed the experiences in their former housing, relating these stories to their current experiences of home in public housing. The organisation of the narratives conveys important aspects of the sense of home, meaningful to respective respondents. The interviews were digitally recorded with respondents’ consent and were transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. In the event that consent was not given for recording, I jotted down important points which were then expanded after the interview session while the information was still fresh in my mind.

Interviewing respondents in their own homes provided the opportunity to conduct informal direct observations during the semi-structured interview sessions. Specifically, I observed the following two things: the physical state of the dwelling unit, and home-making practices or social interactions between household members or with neighbours occurring inside the dwelling unit, in the common hallway and in the neighbourhood within the boundaries of the estate. The evidence gathered through this method provided new queries that I then included in the interviews with respondents. For example, on one particular floor, I observed how the common area was decorated to serve as an extension of the living area. Hence, the conversation with the respective respondent included the utilisation of the common area and how neighbours work together to manage the area. In addition, this stage of data collection coincided with the end of Ramadhan and Eid. This gave me the opportunity to observe tenants’ home-making processes in public housing in relation to an important cultural celebration. On many occasions, I performed independent observations after interviews, to make sense of issues discussed in the interview sessions. These included the state of the amenities and utilities (water supply, sewage disposal) provided in the estates. Issues derived from the observations were then included in the discussion with other respondents to gain their views on the matter. I also observed how common areas were utilised by tenants as part of their domestic routines and made notes on how these activities fitted into the narratives about tenants’ experiences of home in public housing.
Respondents were compensated for their time, which they could otherwise have used to engage in paid labour. In Sarawak, the minimum wage is set at RM3.85 (AUD1.30) an hour. Participation in the interview was treated as equivalent to a day’s work. Hence, the amount of reasonable compensation was RM30.00 per respondent. Respondents were informed about the compensation prior to the interview.

3.3.4 Data analysis

Because they served different purposes in this study, the data captured in the three stages were analysed using different tools and procedures (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Summary of data types, purposes and methods of analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Utility of data</th>
<th>Method of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>To scope issues on the ground and to develop interview schedule</td>
<td>Qualitative – manual coding to capture emerging themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>To develop baseline data and to gather interviewees for the next stage of data collection</td>
<td>Quantitative – descriptive analysis using SPSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>To solicit data to answer the research question</td>
<td>Qualitative – coding and data organisation using ATLAS.ti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discussion that follows largely concerns the analysis of qualitative data attained in the third stage of data collection; this set of data forms the major part of the arguments presented in this thesis. The procedures involved an iterative process, requiring the researcher to move back and forth between the data and the abstract concepts that inform the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). I organised the analysis in line with the conceptual framework described in Chapter Two, to tease out relevant ‘stories’ from the transcripts, using pre identified themes. This approach is known as thematic analysis.
Before discussing the details of conducting the thematic analysis, I need to clarify an intermediate procedure that helped further refine the thesis’s topic. As I was conducting the interviews, I always reread through my field notes to identify important themes emerging from the data. It was during this process that I came across a strong association between housing histories and tenants’ sense of home in public housing. In other words, the favourable or unfavourable lived experiences of home in public housing were linked by tenants to their lived experiences of home in previous housing situations. From this broad connection visible in the field notes, I managed to refine the research question from ‘In what ways do tenants experience home in public housing?’ to ‘In what ways do tenants’ housing histories shape their experiences of home in public housing?’

Figure 3.8 shows the inductive and deductive approaches involved in the data collection and data analysis procedures that construct this thesis. Following the refinement of the research question, the task then was to attribute tenants’ varying experiences of home in public housing to their housing histories.

Figure 3.8: The data collection and analytical procedures that contribute to the inductive and deductive approaches in this thesis
Thematic analysis is the search for themes that emerge as important to the description of a phenomenon (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). The process involves the identification of themes through ‘careful reading and re-reading of the data’ (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis. In practice, construction of the categories or themes in this study were performed by identifying segments of the transcripts that correspond to the research questions. The use of ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data management program, expedites the process of locating relevant segments of the transcripts and permits the researcher to construct a database that organises the information into different themes for quicker and more manageable analysis. Friese (2014) states that there is no specific ways to construct the themes or coding. According to Yin (2009, p. 128), one should begin by answering small questions; for example in this study, I began with, ‘How do controls occur in public housing?’ Relevant quotations inferring a sense of control in public housing were noted and coded using ATLAS.ti, and then inserted into relevant categories. The different answers pertaining to similar issues were pulled together and this procedure helped with the comparison of the ways in which experiences of ‘control’ occurred in the lives of different interviewees. As qualitative analysis is an iterative process, I reverted to the transcripts and the field notes to ensure that my assessment agreed with the original meanings and contexts. The material was then summarised, and the procedure repeated with other small questions that were later pieced together to form the story of this thesis. Other small questions in the analysis included the idea of ‘privacy’ and ‘comfort’. In a later stage, the categories were coded again to reveal a broader layer or theme. For example, the themes reflecting a sense of control, privacy and comfort in public housing can be grouped into ‘sense of home inside public housing’.

Table 3.6 summarises the different stages of coding and thematic analysis performed in this thesis. The organisation of these themes significantly forms the organisation of the findings chapters (Chapters Four and Five). As mentioned, I began the coding by pulling out quotations for ‘small questions’ which comprised the sense of home (see column 1), both in tenants’ former housing and their present public housing. After completing the first procedure, I went on to code these quotations into broader categories – sense of

84
home inside the dwelling and sense of home in the neighbourhood (column 2) – to reflect the idea advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006) that sense of home is multi-scalar. The third layer of analysis captured the different experiences of home inside and outside the dwelling in relation to tenants’ housing histories (column 3). I relate respondents’ sense of home inside the dwelling (both former and current) to other insights from critical geographies of home – that a ‘sense of home’ is material and imaginative, and shaped by power relations and identity – to make sense of the different ways that home was experienced in tenants’ former and current housing. This stage of data analysis also revealed the varied experiences of home, which were very much shaped by tenants’ housing histories. I organised the discussions based on the following sequence of housing histories: parental homes, private rental, squatter settlements and workers’ quarters. As the housing histories are no more or less secure than each other and in fact each housing form is vulnerable in its own ways, a repeated sequence was chosen to provide a coherent flow of the stories, as we move from one housing history to the next, though any sequence would have been equally logical!

Table 3.6: Different layers of coding and thematic analysis employed in this thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) First layer of analysis</th>
<th>(2) Second layer of analysis</th>
<th>(3) Third layer of analysis</th>
<th>(4) Final layer of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(lived experiences of home in former and current housing)</td>
<td>(sense of home is multi-scalar)</td>
<td>Categorise lived experiences of home by housing histories</td>
<td>Identify the trade-offs between the advantages of the former housing and the advantages of public housing, across the different housing histories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former housing</td>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of control and autonomy</td>
<td>* Sense of control and autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of privacy</td>
<td>* Sense of control and autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of comfort</td>
<td>* Sense of privacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of belonging to people</td>
<td>* Sense of comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of belonging to place</td>
<td>* Sense of belonging to place</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of home inside the dwelling:</td>
<td>Sense of home inside the dwelling:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of control and autonomy</td>
<td>* Sense of control and autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of privacy</td>
<td>* Sense of privacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of comfort</td>
<td>* Sense of comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of home in the neighbourhood:</td>
<td>Sense of home in the neighbourhood:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of belonging to people</td>
<td>* Sense of belonging to people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sense of belonging to place</td>
<td>* Sense of belonging to place</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

85
The final layer of data analysis occurred at a much later stage as I was writing up my thesis. The data revealed that how tenants make sense of their home in a dwelling, and whether it is worthy to continue staying there or not, are very much guided by the types of trade-offs that they are willing to make in the said dwelling. In particular, the trade-offs that the interviewees made were between the advantages of the former housing and the advantages of public housing. The trade-offs that people have to make in relation to their housing options have been examined using the life-course approach of housing behaviour/options and this thesis will take this insight into the analysis.

3.4 Quality Criteria for the Research

The question of what features of a research project can ensure its quality aims to answer the following concern: how do we know if findings from our research are trustworthy? In other words, have we ensured that the research is methodologically sound so as to enable us to be confident with the results generated from the study?

Lincoln and Guba (cited in Bryman, 2001, p. 272) propose two primary criteria in qualitative research: trustworthiness and authenticity. This section only considers and reflects on trustworthiness, with specific reference to my own positionality in the research process. In fact, the question of one’s positionality in research is not uncommon and often poses a challenging terrain for researchers. Note that I have excluded ‘authenticity’ as this criterion concerns the wider political impact of the study and resonates better with action research. Also, it has been argued that ‘the authenticity criteria are thought provoking but have not been influential, and their emphasis on the wider impact of the research is controversial’ (Bryman, 2001, p. 275).

One major issue in qualitative research is related to the notion of positionality. That is, qualitative researchers may find it challenging to remain impartial in their research (Bourke, 2014; Deutsch, 2004). In fact, it is argued by Dubois (cited in Deutsch, 2004, p. 892) that ‘no science is value free because we are all shaped by culture, and our belief system inevitably influences our questions and interpretations’. The difficulties of being ‘neutral’ in social research have been noted in the work of many scholars (e.g. Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Merriam et al., 2001). It is, therefore, of paramount importance that social researchers recognise the potential of bias and the different ways that bias can occur, because the
failure to contain certain biases in the research process could compromise the credibility of a piece of research.

I have identified my relative wealth and my gender, as the two dimensions of my positionality that might distinguish me from the interviewees and thus affect the outcomes of the data collection in this thesis. With regard to wealth, my background, which was different from that of the interviewees’, could mediate the ways they interacted with me. For example, they might feel intimidated by the fact that I am a middle-class university lecturer and that I am currently studying in Australia, a country that is perceived to be more advanced than Malaysia. Such feelings of discomfort may lead the interviewees to respond to my questions in ways that they perceive appropriate to my status. Similarly, there were instances when I felt discomfort from, and silently questioned, their responses, especially when their responses were, in some ways, contrary to my own values. Clearly, this signaled a situation where my views in the research were influenced by my own subjectivity. Other than wealth, my position as a female researcher potentially had an effect on the conduct of the interviews. In particular, being a female researcher gave me some advantage in conducting the interviews as most research participants were women. Furthermore, being a Muslim woman who can speak Sarawak Malay, a native language in Sarawak, it was relatively easy for me to be accepted by, and to communicate with, the interviewees. And in situations where the interviewees were male, the effects of gender differences were probably diluted by my height (I am 5 ft. 7 inch, which is taller than an average male³) and short hair, which could be perceived as ‘mannish’ across cultures (Momsen, 2006; Weitz, 2001) and from my personal experience, this assumption also prevails within the Malay culture. Momsen (2006) adds that such ‘ambiguity allow the researcher to enter local male and female space and thus access to wider range of information than would otherwise be available’ (p. 45). On the other hand, the gendered effects could also be mediated by the presence of a man’s wife in the dwelling where we held the interview sessions.

As I could never be ‘neutral’ nor I could control how interviewees responded to me given our differences and expectations, I took several measures to contain potential biases in this thesis. First, I needed to manage my own subjectivity. Hence, I employed self-reflexivity – a

³ The average height of Malaysian males is 5 ft. 6 inch, and female is 5 ft. 2 inch (see Disabled World, 2017).
procedure of paramount importance in any qualitative research to manage one’s subjectivity. This procedure requires researchers to step back and assess their own background, values and interests that may have penetrated into the research process (Krefting, 1991, p. 218). At the same time, I realise we need to make sense of the respondents’ contexts and see an issue from their point of view to understand why they hold certain attitudes or beliefs that may contradict our own values. In order for this to happen, there needs to be prolonged visits to the site to develop rapport and trust between the researchers and the interviewees (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Krefting, 1991). Prolonged engagement, another strategy to contain bias, allows time for both researchers and informants to become accustomed to one another. This procedure is beneficial in minimising the perceived status differences in the interviewee-researcher relations that might hamper the quality of the research. For example, I made it a point to visit the squatter settlements so that when I spoke to the interviewees from this former housing arrangement, we could establish commonality of experiences (see Merriam et al., 2001). I also used my own experience of residing in a precarious rooming facility (when I had my first job in another town in Sarawak) to connect with the interviewees who used to reside in this type of housing in the past. I trusted that given these shared experiences, we could relate better to each other. Through such an established interaction, the interviewees may have felt more comfortable sharing sensitive information enabling me, the researcher, to be more familiar with and understanding of, their circumstances before drawing any biased conclusions. I have discussed in a published paper how the two approaches took shape in this study by reflecting on and responding to my own biases (see Hashim, 2015). In this working paper, I spoke about the challenges faced by new social researchers like myself who are trying to be impartial especially during the stages of data collection. The process of stepping back and critically reexamining our own stance is important in such situations in order to maintain a research project that is ‘marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys and mistakes of the research’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

3.5 Ethical Considerations
In qualitative research, ethical concerns often emerge during data collection processes. Being rigorous about ethics means taking into account several considerations, namely the
level of harm potentially imposed on research participants, the right to privacy, informed consent and issues of deception. Although there are guidelines for negotiating ethical considerations in a research project, it all centers on the researcher’s values to ‘proceed in as ethically a manner as possible’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 230). In terms of harm to participants, this project is categorized as a low risk.

Several ethical considerations were adhered to during the course of data collection. As I worked closely with the research participants, I needed their consent to participate in the project and usually the people I met were happy to share their stories. There were cases however, when respondents expected that I would carry their plight and voices to the governing agencies, thinking that I was representing the housing manager. There were questions on ways to obtain more secure housing. In such cases, it was exceptionally important that I made it clear that the purpose of the study was purely academic. Nevertheless, I often shared affordable housing options provided under the SHC or the local council. By quoting other agencies, it emphasised my non-affiliation with any of those entities. In addition, respondents’ recruitment into the research project should not be driven by deception, for example, by any thought that upon the completion of the study, there would be change to the policy (which I do not have control of). In fact, two respondents were put off by the seemingly ‘unbeneficial’ interview session and cut their sessions short. The act of withdrawing from the interview session was within their rights, hence no questions were asked. It is also important to note that in interview sessions where respondents consented for voice recording, pausing of the recording was necessary when interviewees went off-track and talked about sensitive issues.

Another aspect that a researcher needs to take into account is respecting the cultures of others. It is the researcher’s responsibility to understand the dos and don’ts in a Malay dominant society. For example, a guest is expected to take off their shoes before entering a house and one is expected to wear appropriate clothing (nothing revealing) especially when they are known to represent a formal institution like a university. I also had to respect Malay interviewees’ wishes to be interviewed at least a week after Eid; hence, I shifted my focus to locate non-Muslim respondents during this period. Other considerations included avoiding

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4 According to Article 160 of the Malaysia Federal Constitution, the Malay is Islam
meal times or respecting interviewees’ prayer times where applicable i.e. pausing the interview to give time to interviewees to perform their prayers, resuming the session when they were done. In writing up the report, the participants’ anonymity was secured using pseudonyms. Data were stored using physical storage devices and preferably not on a cloud database where unwarranted exposure is risked.

The procedures described in this chapter were audited and approved by the University of Melbourne human research ethics committee to carry out the study on site. The procedures that occurred on site did not deviate from those included in the ethics report.

3.6 Conclusion

The research design employed in this study is in line with the research paradigm that frames the study. The lived experience of home is best understood using a case study methodology that allows one to use multiple data collection approaches, governed by certain ethics typically associated with qualitative research, to increase the trustworthiness of the study. This study employed both inductive and deductive analysis to understand and organise the data according to their best uses at the different stages of data collection. As noted in this chapter, the most important stage of data collection occurred in stage three; data from this stage provided answers to the research question of how a sense of home occurs in public housing in relation to past housing experiences.
Chapter 4
Analysing the Evidence Part I: Housing Deficits and Sense of Home in Tenants’ Former Housing

4.1 Introduction

To gain an understanding of the different ways in which home is experienced by tenants in public housing in Sarawak (presented in Chapter Five), it is important to understand how tenants’ former dwellings appeared to them, to be homely or unhomely. The accounts provided in this chapter are fundamentally linked to the accounts provided in Chapter Five. This relationship between the sense of home in public housing, and tenants’ experiences in their former housing, is in fact, the central concern of this thesis.

In Sarawak public housing, tenants’ housing histories were largely characterised by housing deficits. Housing deficits, as we have seen and according to Morris et al. (1988), refer to a situation when housing fails to meet social and cultural norms. While the idea of non-deficit (adequate) housing that meets ‘social and cultural norms’ is context specific, that housing should at least exhibit the criteria identified in the United Nations on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN-Habitat, 2014, pp. 3-4). These criteria include: tenure security; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; reasonable location; and cultural adequacy. Housing for the poor, unfortunately, does not exhibit these characteristics. In fact, as demonstrated in the life-course approach to housing behaviour advanced by Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999), many low income households have to make trade-offs between these criteria in their housing. The trade-offs in return, translate into certain lived experiences of home in their respective dwellings. In a broad sense, this chapter narrates tenants’ lived experiences of home and the sense of home they created in their former housing. A substantial number of these stories highlight the experience of housing deficits (which lead to a sense of unhomeliness) resulting from the trade-offs they were required to make there.

As presented in Chapter Two, the work of Blunt and Dowling (2006) is useful to examine how the interviewees’ sense of home is produced in their former housing. The overall organisation of this chapter is framed using the idea that home is multi-scalar. That is, this chapter is structured to show how the experiences of home occur inside the dwelling and
outside the dwelling (in the neighbourhood). The experiences of home inside the dwelling are explored using the idea that home is both material and imaginative and that the sense of home is influenced by power relations and identity. The former notion examines tenants’ lived experiences of home, and their sense of belonging to the physical aspect of their former dwelling; this includes the size and the shape of the living space, and the facilities that equipped the housing. The latter aspect observes how power relations between household members, for example (there are other forms of power relations captured in this thesis), affect the extent to which a dwelling appears homely to its occupants. The stories are gathered from interviewees formerly residing in the following housing tenures or arrangements: parental homes largely found in traditional villages; private rental; squatter settlements; and workers’ quarters.

In the following sections of this chapter, I first explore how housing security was experienced in tenants’ former housing in order to introduce the different ways that the concept is understood in Sarawak. The second part critically examines how the sense of home occurred inside the dwelling units, with emphasis on the idea that home is a site of control and autonomy, and home is a site of privacy and comfort. I then provide accounts of the ways in which tenants’ sense of belonging occurred in their former neighbourhoods, focusing on their sense of belonging to people and place. The final section summarises these accounts, bridging them to the next chapter.

4.2 Housing Security in Tenants’ Former Housing

As discussed earlier in Chapter One, the idea of housing security, denoted by tenure longevity, has been an important feature in the literature exploring the development of the sense of home. This notion is exemplified in the work of Dupuis and Thorns (1998) and Saunders (1989) who argue that homeownership is the most ideal tenure to offer a sense of home. The idea of tenure longevity also prevails in more recent work about home (see Easthope et al., 2015; Mee, 2007; Newton, 2008). Thus far, long-term tenure is perceived to be a necessary criterion for a sense of home to occur. Such an argument does not appear in this thesis. In this section, I will demonstrate that housing security in certain former housing arrangements was better than that in public housing, yet, this security was traded for a fixed lease in public housing for various reasons. To recap, tenants in Sarawak public housing can renew their lease every two-years and the maximum lease is six years, after which they are
expected to leave public housing. Echoing Van Ham (2012), low income households have limited affordable housing options to choose from in Sarawak and they often end up in inadequate housing, accepting this as long as they have a roof over their heads. Before we learn of the different trade-offs that occur in tenants’ housing histories and their respective consequences, we need to understand how interviewees’ occupancy in their former housing was secure. The different ways in which housing security occurred in tenants’ former housing tenures or arrangements are now explored.

**Parental home.** Interviewees who formerly resided in parental homes generally experienced a high sense of housing security compared to other categories of interviewees, primarily because parents are usually the outright owners of the kampong house they reside in. In the past, children could afford owner-occupation by building their own houses on the parental plots, but this is no longer the case due to the scarcity of land in the villages. Over the years, more houses have been built in the villages, causing congestion and newly formed families literally have had no more space in the village to build their own houses. In Sarawak, there are kampong extension programs dedicated to ease crowding in villages but this option requires the purchase of individual land plots which could be too expensive for low income families. As housing prices continues to soar, low income families are pushed further outside the housing market and many are ‘trapped’ in parental homes far longer than expected. Many have had little choice but to continue staying in their childhood homes, as this was the most viable option. In most cases, sons and daughters can stay in the parental homes indefinitely due to the filiation between children and their parents (and vice versa), that profoundly forms the foundation of Asian families.

Not all outright owners in traditional villages have the opportunity to reside in their properties indefinitely; they are in fact, subject to land acquisition for redevelopment purposes. This was the experience of one elderly respondent (PH2, male, aged in 60s, formerly resided in Kampong Astana) when his village, also his birthplace, was acquired to make way for the new Sarawak State Legislative Assembly Building. He was given a piece of land elsewhere to rebuild his family home, which he sold. Unfortunately the money from the sale was not enough to even buy into the low-cost housing market; therefore the interviewee ended up in public housing. This story serves as an example of how forced relocation can bring less security in housing, even when the housing one was relocated from.
was actually owned. In this study, three out of 41 interviewees were involved in non-voluntary relocations. Housing security is not guaranteed even for a tenure traditionally assumed to be most secure such as home ownership (see Boheim & Taylor, 2000).

**Private rental housing.** When compared to the parental home, tenure longevity in affordable private rental housing seems to be less secure due to the absence of a written contract to govern a lease. ‘Legally binding’ is a foreign concept in the private rental sector targeting low income households in Sarawak. According to Sufian (2012, p. 16), the absence of legislation to regulate the landlord-tenant relationship in Malaysia has commonly led to ‘a tenancy that is created through an oral contract only’. (The practice of a written agreement however, is a must for homeownership). While a good proportion of respondents who once lived in private rental housing mentioned having a good sense of housing security, six out of 17 stated otherwise. Their leases were terminated for various reasons, including repossession of the properties, change of ownership, changed use of the property i.e. dwellings are turned into motels, and for other reasons such as making way for higher paying tenants. These unfavourable examples suggest the imbalances of bargaining power in the landlord-tenant relationship, in which tenants perceived themselves as having no right to the properties. Most tenants on the other hand, were able to stay in their rented properties as long as they paid their rent promptly. Their narratives include landlords who appreciated reliable tenants, hence the continuation of the usually open-ended lease. According to one single mother (RO5, aged in 50s, 8 years in rented room), ‘an open ended lease is more secure than a fixed lease’. In many cases, interviewees were not asked to leave the rental properties but they left voluntarily to accommodate the changing needs of their households.

**Squatter settlements.** Compared to the other forms of legal tenure, where occupants have a certain amount of rights to reside in the properties, housing security in the ‘most affordable’ squatter settlement is often challenged due to its illegal status. Respondents spoke about being served with many eviction notices and had their census taken every month by the Land and Survey Department to discourage the number of squatters from growing. Newly erected houses or those found vacant for more than three months were demolished. While some households decided to leave the squatter settlements due to the pressure of forced evictions, some decided to maintain their homes there. Interestingly,
squatter households can decide if they want to relocate into public housing, because generally, only applicants who can afford the rent in public housing can get a place there. Very poor families in the squatter settlements often had to stay put, unless they are given housing assistance but such a situation is rare. According to a Sarawak Housing Corporation (SHC) official, very poor families cannot be forced to leave the squatter settlements and relocate into public housing if they cannot afford it. This fact serves as an unspoken condition for relocation into public housing, that in fact, squatter families still have a choice whether to leave the squatter settlements or not, upon receiving the eviction notices. It also signals that leaving the squatter settlements may or may not result from the eviction notices, that the necessity to relocate is still negotiable with the governing agency. Despite this unspoken option, the practice of eviction has certainly produced very unsettling effects for many.

For the poorest of the poor, the minimal housing and utility costs in the squatter settlements have given them a better sense of housing security for two reasons. First, this is the only place they could afford and second, the conflicting approaches between enforcement on the ground and the policy aims give people faith that they can still continue residing in the squatter settlement. Drawing from the experience of one respondent (SO6, male, aged in 50s, used to reside in Siol Kandis) who had gone through these procedures, forced relocation only occurs when there is immediate need for the land and the process often involves complex negotiations between the state and the squatters. Squatters seem to be offered different conditions from those who are voluntarily relocated into public housing. In other words, the conflicting practices in the different policies allow occupants to ‘buy time’ until they are ready to leave the squatter settlements or until they are forced to leave.

**Workers’ quarters.** In the workers’ quarters, the state of housing security can be both secure at first and then become ambivalent towards the end of the tenure. Rent in the facility is subsidised. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there are different types of workers’ quarters. In this study, all interviewees formerly resided in self-contained units provided by government or semi-government bodies. In this tenure, housing security is guaranteed as long as residents are fully employed by the organisations or until they buy into the property market. At the onset of their retirement, occupants need to vacate the quarters within a
given period. In this study, three out of four respondents had had to leave the quarters due to retirement while one had to relocate as redevelopment took place at the site of his previous accommodation. One retiree was evicted by force for failing to vacate the quarters within the given timeframe, suggesting strict enforcement of the housing policy; tenants are expected to follow through with the agreement once their time is up. For low-income households, this is when their housing future is uncertain as they need to source affordable alternatives in the market.

Clearly in the accounts given, some former housing arrangements have stronger housing security, denoted by long-term tenure, than that on offer in public housing. For example, tenants who were formerly residing in parental homes and the majority in private rental arrangements were able to reside in their former dwelling indefinitely if they chose to do so, but they all decided to move into public housing where the lease is fixed. On this note, I find that the notion of housing security among those on a low income is not entirely dependent on tenure longevity. In the accounts given, housing affordability appears to be a strong defining feature of housing security that appears throughout the different former housing categories. The significance of housing affordability is also highlighted in Mee (2007) when she found that public housing tenants in Australia associated their sense of housing security to affordable public housing. Similarly, the accounts on the conflicting squatter elimination policy and enforcement practices to some extent, have allowed some households to feel confident remaining in the squatter settlements. Accordingly, the extent to which housing regulations shape people’s perception of housing security (apart from the fact that squatter settlements are illegal housing) was highlighted and termed ‘de facto security’ in the recent work of Hulse and Milligan (2014, p. 641). The accounts provided in this section signal the need for a broader definition of housing security and the ways these determinants work in favour of the poor. Similarly, these findings turn our attention to the different aspects of public housing that appear (as the interviewees see it) to be more important than tenure longevity. These aspects can be traced in the following narratives that address the sense of home that respondents experienced in their past housing.

4.3 Sense of Home within the Four Walls
This section critically examines tenants’ sense of home inside their former dwelling. According to Anton and Lawrence (2014), people’s sense of belonging towards their
physical dwelling is stronger than their attachment towards the neighbourhood (p. 453). Therefore, this section observes the interviewees’ sense of home inside their former housing as they decided to keep a roof over their head there. The following definitions of sense of home – home as a site of control and autonomy and as site of privacy and comfort – are key themes utilised in this section. We begin with how the sense of control and autonomy occurred across the different housing histories. The ways in which these experiences are framed by the different components of the critical geographies of home as advanced by (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), are explored in the end of each sections.

4.3.1 Exploring the sense of control and autonomy

As noted earlier, the space inside the dwelling unit is where people have most control. In this study, I found that the ways in which interviewees experienced control and autonomy were largely determined by the housing deficits that occurred in their former dwellings.

Within the parental homes

The experiences of home in parental housing appear to be more complex than those occurring in the other tenures. This is because the parental home, in the context of this thesis, consists of a multigenerational household where filial familial relationships are shaped by expectations within Asian culture. Household members are expected to fulfill certain obligations befitting local cultural expectations. Therefore, in a multigenerational household, the sense of control and autonomy is ‘mediated through the power relationships that exist among different members of the household’ (Easthope et al., 2015, p. 155). While the power relationship in Easthope et al. (2015) was observed through the status of ownership of the dwelling, the power relationship in an Asian multigenerational household could be more complex given the filiation embedded in Asian culture. On many occasions, respondents experienced a lack of control in managing their own household needs when they had to consider the needs of other co-residing household members, especially the elderly such as parents or parents-in-law. Interviewees reported little sense of control in terms of managing their own household economy; performing non-paid work and sometimes care of children. Table 4.1 shows examples of this, drawn from the interviews.
Table 4.1: Inability to manage household’s finances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Solo breadwinner in extended household</td>
<td>My father is retired. My husband had to cover all expenses in the house. Everything was on his shoulders. There were 10 of us in the house; we all relied on his income… (PH3, female, aged in 30s, formerly in parental home in a traditional Malay village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Unable to save</td>
<td>Whenever there was shortage of groceries, my [husband] had to [replenish] them. There, 10 kg of rice for 11 persons could only last us three days. In my own household, 10 kg of rice could last us a month! [There] we could never save! (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, formerly at in-law’s house in a squatter settlement)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five out of eight interviewees who had previously lived in a parental house spoke about the difficulties of sharing expenses in the household, though some acknowledged the savings they gained from not paying rent in the parental home. Working household members especially sons, are expected to contribute part of their income, sometimes a lot of it, to pay for shared items in the household such as food and utility bills (quotation 1, Table 4.1). This arrangement causes frustration among wives as their husbands are loaded with substantial financial responsibilities. It was difficult to plan for their future when their already meagre household income was further stretched to support other members in the parental home (see quotation 2, Table 4.1).

In theory, the sharing of household expenses is supposed to reduce the financial burden across individual low-income households but clearly this is not the situation captured in the narratives. Interviewees cited the feeling of being burdened by the circumstances, when despite their poverty, they were expected to contribute more than they should to the extended household. The situation echoes the comments of Wallace (2002), that household survival strategies do not always occur with good will but they are still performed nonetheless out of the necessity to ‘survive’ urban living. In a patriarchal culture, men are expected to bring home the income, therefore they too are expected to contribute to the larger household, sometimes at the expense of their own family needs. The situation
potentially changes the dynamics between co-residing household members especially when some members are ‘forced’ to contribute more than others in the name of the common good. More often than not, household members did not protest openly. Lack of protest is imbued in the Malay culture; people are expected to be polite, more concerned about other people’s feelings than their own and in general prefer to avoid open conflict (Mastor et al., 2000). These coping strategies framed within Malay culture appear to be a threat to one’s sense of home in the parental house.

Likewise, the women I interviewed shared how little control they had over the performance of non-paid work in the parental homes. Women are expected to carry out household chores on top of caring for their own families. Undeniably, all women interviewed in this study are largely responsible for the domestic chores in their respective households. But the burden is significantly greater among women who formerly resided in parental homes due to the larger family size, larger living space and the structure of the household. The following quotation demonstrates how these expectations are loaded on women:

I could not tolerate it when I was expected to perform household chores [all the time]. I always thought to myself, ‘If I don’t cook, my parents will not eat...’ So I’ll cook, even if that means I’ll be exhausted [after a day’s work] as long as my parents and my husband can have their meals... My siblings always thought that since I’m there and I’m the eldest, I’ll be the one who’s doing the cooking [for my parents].

(PH1, female, aged in 30s, formerly resided in parental home)

The fulfilment of the expected responsibilities robbed them of precious time they could otherwise use with their own families. However, the tasks were still performed as filial duties towards their parents. The above quotation also points to the frustrations the women felt when other members took a laid back attitude towards their own share of responsibilities in the household. The division of gendered expectations in a household is profound in this scenario, when women regardless of their employment status, are expected to continue taking on their traditional roles while men play little role in supporting them.

Unfortunately, these are not the only challenges faced by women. In a patriarchal system, the pressure is more on the women to conform to societal or family norms, including
projecting ‘acceptable’ behaviours in front of the higher ranked members in the extended household. In this study, there was little room in the parental homes for respondents, especially daughters-in-law, to express themselves as they wished. This includes interactions with their husbands (see quotation 1, Table 4.2) and carrying out childcare responsibilities. As shown in quotation 2, Table 4.2, one respondent recollected how she could not discipline her own children without attracting her mother-in-law’s disapproval. The living arrangement gave her little freedom to manage her children’s behaviour. Having said this, living in the parental house was not all bad, as several respondents received elaborate assistance in terms of childcare. The types of support included sending or fetching the children to or from school, and/or tending to their needs before or after school. Respondents reported peace of mind at work, knowing their children were in reliable care. It is interesting to note that many of these respondents are still receiving this support even after they moved into public housing. More of this will be captured in Chapter Five.

Table 4.2: Managing the in-laws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Taking care of ‘hearts’</strong></td>
<td>I need to take care of her [mother in law’s] feelings. If I don’t, she will be heartbroken (laughs). Yes, I need to entertain both my husband and my mother in law. I need to serve them and I need to treat her [mother in law] with extra care. (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, formerly resided with in laws at a squatter settlement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Under the in-laws’ radar</strong></td>
<td>I don’t want to bad mouth... You know how it is when living in a communal house... There are prone to be misunderstandings, regardless of big or small issues. Always! The issues are often like this... When I reprimand my children, my mother in-law often suspected that I was implicating her. I was genuinely trying to discipline my children! (PH4, female, aged in 50s, formerly resided with her in-laws)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Within private rental housing**

The sense of control and autonomy in private rental housing depends upon the nature, condition and management of the dwellings. Slightly over one-third of the respondents could only afford rented rooms in commercial shop houses while others resided in self-contained accommodation usually found in traditional villages or in low-cost residential areas.

Between the two types of private rental housing (i.e. self-contained accommodation and rooming facilities), former residents in rooming facilities had more challenging housing experiences due to the limited access to space and facilities. Interviewees spoke about the difficulty in organising domestic chores because they shared the kitchen, bathroom and toilet. They took turns to use the facilities and had to consider other tenants’ need to utilise the facilities at all times. More often than not, certain strategies needed to be deployed to negotiate ‘washroom deficits’ especially during peak hours. These included taking showers in the workplace and using public toilets or chamber pots to defecate. In short, tenants in rooming facilities had little freedom to decide on how or when to perform chores related to personal hygiene. The experience of control and autonomy in this tenure is best shown in the following narrative:

> It was rather difficult living in [the rented room] at Green Road. We had to consider other people who return from work because they needed to cook and take a shower. We had to cook [dinner] early [around 3 – 4 pm] otherwise there will be a lot of people in the kitchen. There was only one sink and space was very limited. We had our own stoves, but the main problem was the sink [because everyone occupied the sink at the same time]. (RO6, female, aged in 50s, formerly resided in rented room)

The living arrangement in private rented rooms affected households differently across different life stages. Childless couples treated the space differently from households with children. Similarly, families with young children experienced the sense of control differently from families with older children. Accordingly, there were a lot of negotiations between parents and their children in terms of utilising the shared facilities. For example, children were taught to consider other tenants’ needs as they used the washroom:
On school days, I asked my children to take shower first [around 4.00 am] before the others woke up. We need to be considerate to the other tenants and we need to be observant of their needs so that we don’t interrupt their routines. (RO3, female, 30s, formerly resided in a rented room for 8 years)

Housewives on the other hand, found that though they themselves had more control when other tenants were out during working hours, they were expected to carry out washing and cooking before everyone else returned from work. Failure to do so often invited disapproving looks when they used the kitchen or the washroom at the same time as others. They were seen as less considerate of others’ needs and such criticisms caused the rooming facility to be very unhomely.

According to Lee et al. (2002) the establishment of meaningful routines is important in the process of home-making. In the rooming facilities, while certain routines were established, they were decided within the context of limited autonomy. Therefore, these routines were not necessarily preferable. For example, cooking dinner early before everyone else returned from work left interviewees with cold dinner. Similarly, taking a shower at 4.00 in the morning was unpleasant for a child. That said, the necessity to stay housed meant that everybody in the household was expected to adapt to the limitations. In this sense, housing deficits were overwhelming yet tenants had little choice. While most respondents tried to achieve the best outcome within the already limited sense of home, there were times when they could not escape from potential conflicts triggered by the practices of sharing facilities when other tenants were selfish in carrying out their own needs, for example, taking a long time in the shower.

Another major issue that created a sense of unhomeliness in private rental housing was the use of utilities. Tenants in self-contained units often had access to their own meters. However, utilities for rented rooms (and some self-contained dwellings) were normally supplied through shared meters registered under the name of the landlord. With shared meters, utility bills were either split equally between tenants and the landlord, or at a fixed rate or by using other approaches deemed fit by the landlord e.g. (i) water was charged by the number of occupants; (ii) electricity was charged according to the number of electrical appliances in the room. Most respondents who shared utilities were dissatisfied with the
billing approach if bills were split between them and the landlord. Their comments included a lack of transparency in the billing system, in which many claimed they have never seen the bills. Utility supply was often disrupted. Most interviewees claimed they were charged too much and were unhappy with the outcome.

One tenant in a former rented room had access to a separate electricity meter. This suggests the possibility of organising just and transparent billing system in this tenure. The lack of regulation however, allows landlords to determine an approach suitable to their liking. This is an example of uneven bargaining power between landlord and tenant resulting from the lack of regulation in this sector in Malaysia (Sufian, 2012). Most tenants reluctantly accepted the system, which included regular spot checks by the landlords to account for new electrical items in the billing record. Such checking was only conducted in premises where electricity was charged consistent with the number of electrical items owned by the tenants, or in places where charges were fixed; hence, the purpose of the spot checks was to limit the use of power. Despite the intrusiveness, interviewees tolerated the intimidation and the disadvantages for two reasons: the housing costs were within their means and they were driven by the anxiety of losing a shelter. Quoting one single mother (Malay, aged in 50s, formerly resided in a rented room), the landlord regarded tenants as ‘replaceable’ given the high demand for the rental premises. Therefore, tenants are likely to agree to any conditions as long as they are housed. It is clear that due to the absence of checks and balances in the sector, tenants are likely to be the victims of intimidation and little can be done to improve their housing circumstances.

**Within the squatter settlements**

In the squatter settlements, the lack of control and autonomy was primarily linked to the absence of regular water and electricity due to the settlements’ illegal status. Access to water here was viewed as more important than access to electricity. The absence of regular water supply affected the respondents in two different ways. First, it meant major efforts to collect water especially during the drought season. Second, it implied prudent use of water due to limited supply. The demanding efforts to collect water generally included a roster if the settlement had some access to water supply e.g. a common pipe (see Figure 4.1), which posed different challenges (see quotation 1, Table 4.3). For settlements without shared water supply, water collection tasks included frequenting nearby ‘regulated’ residential or
commercial areas to acquire water. Among households who were not vehicle owners, this
task proved to be even more taxing when it involved hiring of vehicles to purposely go out
to get water. One family travelled on foot to do so (see quotation 2, Table 4.3). Respondents
were not only tested physically but also were tried emotionally from having to ask for water
from individuals who may at times refuse them. In some cases, they had to pay a higher
price to purchase water. Some accessed free water in public areas like the wet market but
when these efforts involved taking water from fire hydrants, interviewees were often
worried of the repercussions as they saw the action was akin to stealing water.

Figure 4.1: A common pipe in Siol Kandis

Each different water hose shown in the picture leads
to a different house. As scheduled in a roster, every
household is given up to an hour per day to collect
water. Clean water is supplied to a large storage
facility usually placed in the washing area. The next
household on the roster will then replaced the hose
with their own to start channeling water into their
own dwelling.
Table 4.3: Challenges in collecting water

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Collecting water at odd hours</td>
<td>[In Siol Kandis] we had one leader who was in charge of a roster. If you missed your turn for that day, that’s it. Each day, each household was given half an hour to collect water. But it was very difficult! [For 15 years] we woke up in the middle of the night to collect water between 1.00 to 2.00 am. (SQ6, male, aged in 50s, formerly resided in squatter settlement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Taxing efforts to collect water</td>
<td>There was no toilet or piped water. We depended on a pond where run-off water from the dumpsite ended up. On school days, we collected water from school and we walked for a mile. Sometimes, we went to nearby houses but people didn’t always allow us to take water. We used plastic bottles but were limited to several bottles [per person to carry], and that was enough for 2-3 days use. On rainy days, we collected rainwater using storage tanks. (SQ7, female, aged 40s, resided in a hut on a dumpsite for 16 years)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

As shown in the first quotation on Table 4.3, SQ6 did not renegotiate the roster just so that his household could have a more comfortable routine. His rationale was to maintain harmony in the community by respecting the decisions made collectively by the early settlers. In this case, the sense of respect for the social structure frames how respondents reacted to certain decisions made concerning their own households. Such respect is maintained, although at the expense of their own comfort, as indicated in SQ6’s story.

The lack of regular water and electricity supply affected the performance of domestic chores in the squatter settlements. Household members, especially women, had little control over how they wanted to carry out household chores. One example is the limited use of water for washing and cleaning, as exemplified in one respondent’s experience when each member in her household had only one medium-sized bucket of water for showering daily. The task of collecting water was also delegated to older children – this experience quickly taught them the value of immediate access to this resource, upon relocation into public housing. Similarly, restricted electricity supply enforced the limited use of modern technology in squatter settlements. Households were unable to purchase fresh food in large quantities
due to the absence of cool storage facilities. The lack of technology made house chores very laborious for women.

The evidence of human ingenuity in negotiating housing deficits is strongly evidenced in this setting, primarily around the management of water and electricity supply, done either individually and/or collectively. The evidence comprises rainwater or surface run-off water collection systems and the distribution of water using self-help water storage facilities:

"We made drainage to channel water into the ponds [or tanks]. Our house was a little bit far from the storage, so we shared money to purchase the hose – around RM10 (AU$3.30) per door – and used pipes to distribute water from the tank to our houses. (SQ1, female, aged in 40s, formerly resided in Sg. Tapang squatter settlement)

Every squatter house had its own water storage. In Sungai Tapang village, there were also common storage facilities to maximise water collection and storage capacity. These efforts had their limitations when the quality of water stored in tanks deteriorated and the water became unsuitable for washing, especially during the period of low rainfall. In the interviews, several respondents from Sungai Tapang village mentioned feeling miserable from having to use murky and foul smelling water from the storage facilities to wash.

Human ingenuity is also noted in efforts to generate electricity, either from one’s own generator or tapped from those of others (see Figure 4.2). Electricity supply was limited to several hours per day and to negotiate this, households were required to devise innovative strategies such as the use of ice blocks in Styrofoam boxes as a temporary cooling storage for meat and fish, or reusing old car batteries or solar batteries to power up light bulbs."
Figure 4.2: Evidence of human ingenuity in a squatter settlement

(Top left) A self-help common storage tank in Sungai Tapang where rainwater is collected and redistributed using water pipes. (Bottom left) Solar power is used to generate power enough to charge mobile phones or to power up light bulbs. (Centre) An individual water storage tank in Siol Kandis used to capture rainwater and to store treated water from the common pipe. (Right) An electricity generator fuelled using petrol which runs for about 6 hours per day. Some respondents paid roughly RM110 (AU$37) per month for electricity, or households were charged RM9 (AU$3) for each light bulb.

The illegal status of their housing brought major disadvantages to squatter households but this reality does not deter the poor from trying making a home in the squatter settlements. As noted earlier, the minimal housing costs were the main attraction for poor families to continue coping with the unfavourable circumstances of residing in this former housing.

Within the workers’ quarters

Amidst these unfavourable recollections, interviewees who formerly resided in the workers’ quarters (in the context of this thesis, it is either government or semi-government owned) had the most favourable housing conditions. All respondents in this category consisted of nuclear families who had full access to self-contained living quarters. All but one reported feeling satisfied with their former dwellings. In their accounts, the dwellings adequately met their households’ needs, hence there was little issue surrounding the sense of control or autonomy for this group of respondents. The favourable lived experience in this former housing shaped interviewees’ expectations towards what living condition should be in
public housing, since both kinds of facilities are managed by government or semi-government entities. The contrasting expectations and reality are explored in Chapter Five.

**Discussion**

Most of the stories presented in this section illustrate the experiences of unhomeliness among the poor in Sarawak where affordable and adequate housing is difficult to come by. In the different types of former housing, the lack of control and autonomy appears across different issues. Here, I list them in brief. Interviewees who used to reside in parental homes were deprived of the freedom to manage their household finances independently. They also faced challenges in managing their own children as well as carrying out household chores. Tenants who used to reside in private rental accommodation, especially in rooming facilities, had difficulties in carrying out household chores as they had to share washing and cooking facilities with other rooming tenants. Many tenants in private rental had limited use of water and electricity given the conditions set by the landlords. In the unregulated squatter settlements, interviewees were severely affected by their lack of access to clean water and electricity supply, so much so that they were limited in the ways that they could organise their household chores, and were burdened by the task of carrying clean water regularly. In short, these stories indicate the specific challenges that interviewees had to negotiate, as a result of the housing deficits in their former dwellings.

The lived experiences of home in tenants’ former housing are able to be explained using the insights gathered from the critical geographies of home. First, the sense of home as both material and imaginative when residing in housing with certain deficits has resulted in reduced sense of belonging to the dwelling. Here, the imaginative aspect of the home relates to the feelings or the meanings that interviewees attach to their former housing. For example, sharing a living space (the parental home) with other relatives meant interviewees had limited freedom to decide how to distribute their income. The parental house then appears as a site of financial restrictions but on the other hand, it is also a place that offers shelter and protection, and reliable care for young children. Second, the sense of home is profoundly shaped by the power relations that occur inside and outside the dwelling. Across all housing histories (except workers’ quarters), women are found to be the constant ‘actor’ negotiating the feeling of unhomeliness in the dwelling, primarily because the patriarchal Sarawak society dictates that women belong to the domestic realm while men bring home
the income. Also, the lack of control and autonomy is ascribed to the local culture when people are expected to adhere to it in order to maintain social harmony. For example, in this thesis, the Malay culture obligates men and women to be respectful to the more senior members in a multigenerational household while the Iban are expected to adhere to the decisions made by their local community structure. Similarly, the unregulated private rental sector has created unbalanced landlord-tenant relationships where some tenants are subjected to a landlord’s intimidations. These stories importantly highlight the different ways that low income households experience sense of home in Sarawak. Bringing their stories to the fore is a contribution of this thesis, as the meanings of home that currently fuel the literature are largely derived from nuclear, middle-class households from the English speaking context.

The following material presents this thesis’s contribution with regard to the notion of control and autonomy at home.

Men and women are argued to experience home differently; in particular, women are said to be subjected to the feeling of unhomeliness in the domestic space more than men (Somerville, 1992, p. 535). My thesis argues that men’s position in the household is not entirely superior as they too, are subjected to power relationships in the parental home. For example, men had little choice but to contribute financially to the parental home and sometimes more substantially than other co-residing members. This finding challenges the idea about men’s superiority in the household, drawn from nuclear, middle-class English-speaking households. This thesis also found that women in parental homes continue juggling not only work-family conflicts (see for example Pinto & Coltrane, 2013), but they are also challenged by the need to manage their relationship with other co-residing extended families. Such unfavourable experiences are certainly more intense for women in the parental homes in Sarawak, than those presented in the work of Klocker et al. (2012) where the arrangement is short term (p. 2248). But the living-together arrangement in this study took much longer than was initially intended and resulted in a lot of unexpressed tensions in the household. Overall, in the parental home (and also in the other housing histories), men and women were affected differently by the expectations that society placed on them, but it seems that the experiences of limited control for the women belonging to the low income group are more varied and more pronounced, compared to men. In
addition, except for the accounts of how settlers from informal settlements in Latin America have participated in the home-making processes following the granting of the legal status of their dwelling in the slum area (Kellett & Moore, 2003), not much is currently known about residing in unregulated private rental and squatter settlements and making a home there. Again, the stories presented in this thesis contribute to filling this gap by highlighting how the sense of homelessness or unhomeliness occurs in the different housing arrangements of low income families in Sarawak.

Moving on, we shall explore how the sense of privacy and comfort appeared in tenants’ housing histories.

4.3.2 Exploring the sense of privacy and comfort

This section unpacks the ways in which privacy and comfort were a characteristic of tenants’ former housing. The notion of privacy has always been associated with people’s ability to exclude others from their meaningful territory (Marshall, 1972; Somerville, 1992). Most households included in this thesis are households with dependent children; privacy has been argued to be important not only for adults, but also important for children’s well-being (Newell, 1995; Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011). Thus, a dwelling is more likely to become a home when it affords occupants with an adequate amount of privacy, and this includes prohibiting surveillance. Similarly, a dwelling that offers adequate privacy is likely to provide comfort to its occupants. We shall now observe how these two important notions of homeliness occur in the daily experiences of the poor in Sarawak.

Within the parental homes

Respondents’ sense of privacy and comfort in the parental homes was affected in two ways by their housing situation. From the literature we know that, privacy is violated when individual households have little control to ‘determine what others know about them...’ (Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011, p. 767). Also, privacy deprivation occurs when a dwelling fails to provide individual isolation or solitude, primarily due to space limitations. With regard to the first matter, respondents shared feelings of discomfort from not being able to conceal sensitive issues from the extended household. For example, it was difficult for interviewees to hide their financial trouble when they repeatedly failed to contribute their share of income to the parental home. While there were some extended household
members who could be accommodating and sympathetic, others were judgemental (see quotation below). The situation is akin to putting the troubled party under surveillance and caused feelings of alienation:

Normally we will [all put in to] buy rice and other food stuff, right? But there were times when I didn’t [contribute] and the others gave me this unhappy [disapproval] look. (RE2, aged in 30s, male, formerly resided in the parental home prior to private rental)

With regard to the second matter, in the parental home, each family normally occupied a room. This involves the sharing of a bedroom between parents and children, resulting in overcrowding and lack of privacy. Not every household I met experienced overcrowding. But for the respondents who had, there were often at least ten people living under one roof. The living conditions were certainly uncomfortable, as narrated below:

My own family occupied one room. We had to share with our children. It was congested. When the boys got older, they slept in the living room. That was how we coped... (PH4, female, aged in 50s, female, formerly resided with in laws)

The lack of privacy became more apparent as children got older and required their own personal space. In responding to households’ changing needs, the sleeping areas of older children and their parents were separated to create better privacy, at least for the parents. This study did not explore the effects of restricted privacy on children, but it has been argued that access to adequate privacy is crucial for children’s personal development (Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011). These accounts, however, seem to suggest that children’s privacy was understood in relation to their parents’, echoing the views of Newell (1995) and Shmueli and Blecher-Prigat (2011). From the Islamic perspective, the arrangement of separate sleeping spaces is crucial as the segregation of space makes it possible for parents to keep their conjugal life securely away from their children. This option involved turning the living room into a sleeping area at night but did not offer space for individual privacy. This example illustrates how household resources can be mobilised to negotiate daily routines in the available space (Datta et al., 2007). But multiple uses of space can create space-use conflict and stress between different users. For instance, a loud television in the
living room could be a disturbance for an older son who also uses the same space as his sleeping area.

Home as a site to restore and recuperate was unlikely to materialise in the parental homes due to the sights, noises or smells (see Mee, 2007, p. 223) generated by co-residing members. These include children’s cries and sounds from the daily routines that were taking place in the dwelling. In mitigating or minimising the ‘disturbances’, residents could only ask their own family members to reduce the noise. They had little control over other family members’ behaviours. For example, while a father could ask his own children to stop playing so that he could have some ‘peace and quiet’, asking his nephews or nieces to do the same could potentially invite a feeling of uneasiness among the children’s parents. In fact, children’s behaviours and parenting styles often caused family disputes. According to one respondent, it was awkward when parents were involved in disputes because of their children; but when the children became friends again, it was the parents who found it hard to let go.

The complications of living in a multigenerational household are noted in past studies (Anderson, 1972; see Klocker & Gibson, 2013; Klocker et al., 2012). Klocker and Gibson (2013) suggest that housing design should allow extended households to reside as individual families, in order to maintain privacy in this housing arrangement (pp. 557-558). This notion may work in a region where individual privacy is of paramount importance. In Sarawak however, the issues are unlikely to resolve because the living arrangements offered little opportunity for independent living. Furthermore, Asian cultures place less value on personal privacy (Ozaki, 2002); in fact, I foresee that extended households in the Sarawak culture are encouraged to live as one family. This culture therefore, is likely to prohibit a living arrangement that undermines togetherness in a multigenerational household.

Moving on, this study found that interviewees in the other former housing categories were able to reside independently but with different challenges that affected their sense of privacy and comfort.

Within private rental housing
The following stories are gathered from interviewees who used to reside in private rental housing. As noted earlier, there are two types of rented dwelling in this tenure: rooming
facilities and self-contained accommodation. In rooming facilities, individual families were confined to a room where the room became the site of multiple social reproduction activities. The confined living space resulted in overcrowding, but to a greater degree than the situation encountered by interviewees who used to reside in parental homes. Unlike the earlier group discussed, tenants in rented rooms had little opportunity to spread outside their rooms to perform certain routines (such as sleeping). Apart from cooking and washing that were performed outside in the common area, other routines such as eating, drinking, studying, recreational activities and sleeping had to occur, sometimes simultaneously, in that small space.

In the rented rooms, children’s sleeping space was not separated from their parents’. The parents’ concern was similar to those narrated by interviewees who used to reside in parental homes. Although this group of respondents were unable to cope in the ways that those in the parental home were, they employed other ways to deal with the discomfort however the strategies did not always produce favourable outcomes. Two single mothers, RO4 and RO7, shared how they had to be separated from their sons, and were joined by their daughters, to negotiate privacy and comfort in their former housing. With the daughters, they gained the much needed privacy in their rented rooms. RO4’s (aged in 50s, mother of four) adult son had to reside elsewhere as all of them could not find privacy had he shared the room with them. RO7 (aged in 40s, mother of six) on the other hand, had a very volatile housing pathway and her uncertain housing circumstances prohibited RO7 from taking in her two youngest sons who were still at school then. They needed comfort and stability and her housing situation could not offer such stability at that time.

The functions of the rented rooms were stretched further when these spaces served multiple purposes. In this thesis, I have found that rented rooms served as a site to generate income as well as to care for the ill or disabled family members. Although there are only two cases relating to the extensive use of a rented room, these stories provide insight to the severity of the housing stress caused by certain life-course events, compounded by a lack of institutional support. For this purpose, only RO3’s story is shared here. RO3 (female, aged in 30s, resided in a rented room for 8 years) recollected how the room that her family of six occupied became the centre for her tailoring business. The room also served as a site to care for her paralysed mother. Accordingly, the lack of privacy in the room was
compounded by the caring activities for her mother, the constant whirring of the sewing machine and by visiting clients who wanted to order or pick up their clothes:

I can’t say we were comfortable in that room because my ailing mother was also with us before she passed away. The room was not big. In that room, I make my clients’ clothes; my children slept in there too. It was crowded, like canned sardines. (RO3, aged in 30s, rented room in a shop house)

RO3 did not feel safe leaving her mother alone due to the presence of other tenants in the shop house, nor did she feel it was right to lock her up in the room (to maintain her privacy) when she went out to fetch her children from school. Consequently, her husband settled for a lower paying but more flexible job so he could help manage the children. The reduced income partly explains the long term stay in the rented room, as proposed in the life-course and housing behaviour model (Van Ham, 2012) that importantly informs this thesis. The other reason was the strategic location for her tailoring business. Because the children were still young, RO3 had little difficulty dealing with the children’s needs in a congested space yet she realised they needed a bigger place because the children were growing.

The interviewees who formerly rented in self-contained accommodation had few issues concerning privacy since they had the whole dwelling to themselves. More than half of the households in private rentals could only afford cheaper, low quality self-contained dwellings. A house of good condition albeit in a low-cost neighbourhood would incur higher rent, probably being too expensive for many low income households. On the contrary, a dwelling in poor condition is definitely cheaper due to its state; its affordability attracts many low income households. It seems that a house has to be in a ‘poor’ condition to be afforded by low-income renters – a trade-off that interviewees in this category had to make – as reflected in the different types of housing deficits captured here.

Interviewees’ sense of belonging (or lack of belonging) to their dwelling was associated with the level of discomfort that they experienced due to the housing defects. Leaking roofs were a common problem. There were cases when households woke up in the middle of the night to escape the rainwater that came through the leaking roof. Holes in dilapidated wooden houses allowed the entry of rodents, while some gaps were large enough to allow break-ins, bringing the issue of personal safety to the fore. Wooden houses on stilts were reported to
be structurally unsound, eroding tenants’ confidence to continue residing in the dwelling. With multiple defects in her former rented kampong house, RE5 did not regard the place as a safe haven. It failed to protect her family from potential disturbances attributed to the weather, intruders, or pests like rodents and snakes. Some interviewees also perceived that the defects could grow into something worse, as shown in the following quotation:

The house there [Bintawa] was very bad. There were holes everywhere [huge holes, intruders could easily climb in]. The house was shaky – I was afraid when it rained or was windy. There was a shared wooden walkway leading to the house and to a school behind. Every time when children ran [on the walkway] the house was shaking. I was terrified. (RE5, aged in 30s, female, formerly rented a house in a traditional village)

Due to poor housing conditions, interviewees reported minimal investment in home-making practices, for example, on home furniture or appliances. One respondent (RE1, female, aged in 50s, used to reside in a rented house in Bintulu) perceived that the furniture could be damaged by rainwater that leaked through the roof. The poor dwelling conditions, according to the interviewees, were not worth the amount of rental they paid. Yet, one cannot risk leaving because the next accommodation may not be better; it could be more expensive or the dwelling could be in worse condition, as illustrated in RE8’s housing pathways:

Do you believe that [within 2 years] I have rented three houses in Bandar Baru Semariang? The [first] house was okay, it was a terraced house, but the rent was too expensive, RM300 [or AU$100] per month. After two months, we moved to a house behind. It was leaking. The house was in bad shape. I was pregnant then. Three months later, we moved into the third house. That was the house that was repossessed. We rented there for a year. On rainy days, the front lawn was flooded. It was tiny! (RE8, aged in 30s, female, formerly in rented low-cost house)

Next, we shall learn how some landlords’ practices of utility management affect privacy. Although the issue concerning utility use is only reported by three out of 17 respondents,

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5 Bandar Baru Semariang is a ‘new’ township located in Kuching north. The township, which started in 2000, has a substantial proportion of low-cost housing projects funded by the state government to assist eligible low income households to enter homeownership.
the ways in which the practices of housing management disrupt privacy is worth noting. Oftentimes, landlords conducted spot checks inside the premises to find out if there were new electrical appliances not accounted for in the utility billing record. Tenants felt disrespected and that their private space was invaded when landlords randomly stepped into the premises, looked around and asked questions about the appliances they owned, as given in the following quotation:

She came into the room, she looked around. She did not care about the people inside [whether or not they were ready to receive guests]. By right, she cannot simply go in; she should stay at the door. She treated the house like it is hers. Of course she is the owner but once you have rented out the place, you should not disturb them [tenants]. (RE1, aged in 50s, male, private rental in Bintulu)

Tenants’ sense of privacy and comfort in the low quality private rental properties, or the lack of this, was the outcome of the unregulated private rental sector in Sarawak. Despite the numerous housing deficits, many decided to stay on because being houseless was worse than being homeless. This trade-off was also reported among tenants who used to reside in squatter settlements.

**Within the squatter settlements**

In the squatter settlements, privacy and comfort are affected by unsound dwelling conditions combined with unreliable access to basic utilities. Figure 4.3 shows some different conditions in the squatter housing units, to demonstrate interviewees’ state of comfort when they were still residing in the squatter settlements.
In a squatter house, there is almost no dedicated space for private and non-private activities. The sleeping area is often conflated with the guest entertaining area, as evidenced in Figure 4.4 where a queen sized bed was also occupying the living area of a house I visited. There is a mix of nuclear and multigenerational households in this former housing category that participated in this study. The nuclear families were able to tolerate the lack of space separation better than multigenerational families. In the latter, one respondent spoke about severe deprivation of privacy when she and her extended household of 11 persons had to sleep together in the living area because there was no dedicated bedroom in the squatter house owned by her parents-in-law. Being a woman, she had difficulties adjusting to the living arrangement because there was no space for her to obtain solitude inside the dwelling.
I also found that such a very basic housing design affected women more than men. Female respondents cited a lack of privacy and comfort as evidenced by having to take baths in open spaces inside the house or in the common area next to the pooled water collection system. The former, although located within the privacy of the dwelling, was not fully protected from the gaze of others (see Figure 4.5). The latter situation resulted in feelings of uneasiness among female respondents who preferred taking their baths in an enclosed space. In certain areas that require full enclosure, the separation between private and non-private spaces was attempted using temporary screens that may or may not provide adequate privacy (see Figure 4.5). Having said this, some squatter houses were without toilets and in such circumstance, household members had to defecate in man-made holes:

We had makeshift toilets. We dug the holes ourselves. It was like digging a well. We didn’t have water so we used soil [to cover the waste every time after use]. Once the hole is full, we dig another hole next to it. (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, formerly resided in Sungai Tapang squatter settlement)
Figure 4.5: A bathroom and a toilet in a squatter home

(Left) This is the space where SQ8 used to take her bath. There is no door to fully enclose the space, and it is located ‘too close’ to a neighbouring house. (Right) This blue flag that bears the logo of the current ruling party is now reutilised as a toilet screen. As shown in the picture, there is still an opening and one has to use additional garments e.g. towel to close the gap.

Additional stories detailing a lack of comfort due to very poor housing conditions, are shared by two interviewees who are extremely poor. In both cases, these interviewees had to relocate from shelters which were found to be unfit for occupancy. Such poor housing conditions brought about ‘love-hate’ relationships with rain; love because rain brought water right to their doorstep and hate because rain turned their home into an unsettling, wet terrain. The rainy season always put them on standby to deal with the downpour and this included removing furniture and using pots or pails to catch water drips:

We could not stay in that house anymore. Even if we wanted to wait [continue staying], the rain wouldn’t let us. I didn’t really mind about water and electricity supply. I was really stressed about the house. The house was flooded whenever it rained! I used canvas to cover the leaking roof [but to no avail] (SQ3, male, aged 60s, formerly in Taman Won)

The lack of access to a regular electricity supply compounded with the actual housing forms affected thermal comfort in the dwelling. As shown in Figure 4.3, squatter homes utilised zinc roofing due to the cheap cost and many houses are without ceilings. Zinc sheets as roofing materials quickly absorb or release heat in response to the surrounding
environment. The absence of ceilings causes heat to transfer directly into the house, creating very warm interiors especially on hot sunny days. The windows and doors are normally left open to encourage ventilation but with little result. While other households in regulated housing use electric fans or air-conditioning to increase comfort at home, the absence of electricity prohibited squatter families from doing so. Because of the heat, household members found more pleasure spending time outside the house. They interacted with their neighbours or tended younger children or engaged in gardening while escaping the heat (see following quotation). The disadvantages experienced inside the dwelling created the opportunity for tenants to engage in friendly interactions with their neighbours:

During daytime, we had nothing to do [after our chores are done]. We waited for our husband [or school going children] to get home. That is how it was when there was no generator [electricity]. That was our style. Normally we would be chatting and those tending their children would be doing that together. (SQ1, Bidayuh, female, 40s, formerly resided in Sungai Tapang)

Narratives about housing precariousness have been reported in the context of migrant farmworkers, mostly Latino, in the U.S. as detailed in the work of Arcury and colleagues (see Arcury et al., 2012). Overcrowding, lack of privacy, uncomfortable indoor temperatures, limited access to clean drinking water and unhygienic living condition inside the dwelling, are among the findings reported in the study by Arcury and others, very similar to the stories narrated by the former squatter settlers included here.

**Within the workers’ quarters**

Unlike the other interviewees covered thus far, most tenants from workers’ quarters experienced adequate privacy and comfort. Their dwellings were spacious, sufficient to accommodate the needs of a nuclear household. Repairs were completed quickly upon request, ensuring good conditions in the units and so comfortable living. Due to the good housing conditions, employees felt appreciated by the organisations they worked with. These housing qualities turned the living quarters into an ideal home which explains interviewees’ reluctance to leave the place when they were scheduled to do so.

Unusual amidst the positive feedback, one interviewee cited a lack of comfort in the government barrack they occupied for 21 years. His family of six was housed in two-
bedroom, self-contained accommodation located in a forest reserve nearby his workplace. His dissatisfaction was attributed to space inadequacy in the dwelling, where his family faced challenges to manage their growing children’s needs. Similar to the stories shared by interviewees from parental homes, the living room in their dwelling was also turned into a temporary sleeping area for their growing children. In fact, QR1’s dissatisfaction was more than just about space inadequacy, the feeling also stemmed from the poor sense of belonging that they experienced in the local community (this story will be further explored in Section 4.4.1).

Discussion
The lack of privacy and comfort reported in this section is largely framed using the idea that a sense of home is both material and imaginative. While the ‘material’ aspect clearly refers to the physical state of interviewees’ former dwelling, the ‘imaginative’ aspect can refer to how people associate their sense of privacy and comfort at home with the state of the dwelling. For example, this thesis found that the lack of privacy (imaginative) experienced by many interviewees is linked to the practice of sharing a bedroom among family members (material). Indeed, space inadequacy has been identified as a main reason for privacy deprivations. Similarly, the living arrangement in a multigenerational household further complicated privacy deprivations when interviewees found themselves unable to keep certain information about their own households from the knowledge of co-residing families. In these accounts, interviewees’ former housing (material) become a site of uneasiness and potentially became a site of surveillance (imaginative) when they were unable to find solitude in their domestic sphere.

Many of the stories presented in this section show that the sense of privacy and comfort in interviewees’ former housing was shaped by power relations and identity. First, we have learned how tenants in private rental have been deprived of their privacy when landlords conducted spot checks on the rental premises in an intrusive manner. Such a situation is less likely to occur in regions where regulations exist in the private rental sector to protect tenants (Easthope, 2014; Hulse & Milligan, 2014). Second, the perception of deprivation of privacy is not only observed from a psychological perspective (that access to privacy is important for self-development), but also from a religious point of view. For Muslim interviewees, a feeling of discomfort was derived from people’s’ inability to provide
adequate living space that adhered to Islamic teaching. In particular, the sleeping areas between parents, male and female children have to be separated by the time the children reach ten years old. As we can see in this section, most households were unable to improve their housing situations in this timeframe and were forced to cope in their own ways to obtain the best forms of privacy and comfort within their disadvantaged housing circumstances. These findings suggest that the production of forms of privacy has been under-researched, at least within the context of low income households or within the context in Malaysia. How privacy relates to housing in Malaysia has been narrowly understood from the perspective of design (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009; Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2008, 2010; Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006). By introducing the other factors (power relations and religious beliefs) that shape people’s sense of privacy and comfort, my thesis engages with an alternative view to expand how privacy is understood.

Next, we shall learn how tenants experienced a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood of their former housing.

4.4 Neighbourhood as an Extension of Home

This section explores how the neighbourhood serves as an extension of home, using the idea that the home is porous and multi-scalar. According to Kearns and Parkinson (2001), the neighbourhood can be treated as an extension of home due to the routines and familiar activities that take place in this setting. In particular, this section provides accounts of how people experience senses of belonging in their former neighbourhood. In this chapter, the accounts about the porosity of the home are limited to the events occurring outside the dwelling unit or in the surrounding neighbourhood that potentially affect the meanings attached to home inside the dwelling. This approach is framed by the view that the domestic is ‘created through extra-domestic and vice versa’ (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 27). This approach also echoes (Massey, 1994, 1995). To note the multi-scalar experience of home is to observe how lived experiences of home occur across different scales and these include the body, the dwelling, the immediate neighbourhood, the suburb, the city, the state, the nation and even the world (see Ziebarth, 2009). In this thesis, the spatial scale of focus ranges from inside the dwelling unit, to the immediate neighbourhood and to the suburb where the dwellings are located. How home occurs inside the housing unit has been
discussed in Section 4.3. This section here focuses on the latter, exploring how feelings of belonging or alienation are constructed across these broader spatial scales.

The neighbourhood as an extension of home is explored under two important themes. First, this section examines how tenants develop a sense of belonging to the community. Second, I observe how the sense of belonging is constructed in relation to place. Some materials may overlap between categories, but this is unavoidable as the idea of the home itself is unbounded. Most of the experiences of home in the neighbourhood are in fact, favourable. This is not to discredit the unfavourable experiences interviewees had inside the dwellings but the positive experiences recorded outside the dwellings are good examples to demonstrate that a sense of home is not static and oftentimes, can be contradictory.

4.4.1 Sense of belonging to the community

Using two themes emerging from this thesis – length of residence and homogeneity – this section provides accounts of how tenants experience a sense of belonging to the community in their former neighbourhoods. These themes are portrayed in the literature, as important determinants that shape social cohesion and sense of belonging to the community.

Amongst former residents of the parental homes

In parental homes located in traditional villages, the sense of belonging to community was profoundly shaped by strong social cohesion, developed through familiarity with the village locals with whom the interviewees spent a lot of time. In fact, many of them are related. Interviewees, especially mothers, recollected the benefits they gained from the help of other members in the village, including with care of children. Here, the village adults exercised informal social control to negotiate anti-social behaviours (Silver & Miller, 2004; Warner & Rountree, 1997) as noted previously, through the practices of monitoring and reprimanding the children in the villages, whenever appropriate. Parents admitted that this ‘mechanism’ ensured children’s safety as they were likely to be under the watchful eyes of their relatives wherever they went in the village. Thus, parents were less worried about their children’s whereabouts or what the children did when they played with others.

In the village, I have less concern about letting them go out and play because my uncles will keep an eye on them [and other children] when they are playing. I have
no fear letting them out of my sight. (PH4, female, aged in 30s, formerly resided with parents at Kampong Tupong)

Here, the porosity of the home is evident. Parents were confident that their children were safe in the village environment, despite not being under their parents’ supervision. Here, strong bonding motivates community members to look out for each other, resulting in good perceptions of personal security. PH6’s response (to my question about an incident of a stolen motorcycle in Kampong Ajibah Abol) suggests the importance of an intact community to deter crimes from taking place in her former neighbourhood:

No such cases in the village. I felt more secure there. There are people left and right watching after you and your belongings. Here [public housing] is not like that. The doors are shut most of the time. (PH6, female, aged in 70s, formerly resided in Kampong Ajibah Abol)

Sharing a similar culture is another important aspect that contributes to people’s belonging to their respective village and community. Homogeneity is usually observed in typical traditional villages where people are bonded by race and ethnicity (Vervoort, 2012). In the context of this study, the effects of homogeneity are strengthened by affinity (kinship resulting from marriage) and consanguinity (blood relationships). Cultural similarity allows for exchanges or favours to occur more conveniently. This is illustrated in the practices of exchanging home-cooked food, oftentimes between neighbours of similar religions. This pattern of exchanges is due to certain restrictions imposed by different religions. For example, Muslims are forbidden to consume pork and alcohol, and Hindus do not include beef in their diet. Because of restrictions in the respective cultures, most interviewees perceived that it was more convenient to share or exchange with people from the same race or religion as them. This is not to say that people of different cultures do not interact but in terms of religious obligations, consideration for others’ beliefs is highly demanded in this society. To a large extent, sharing a similar culture enhances one’s sense of ontological security in the community, which many interviewees described as ‘our own people’. This description (our own people) is rigidly applied to people not only from a similar culture, but also from a similar place of origin. In the village, being with their ‘own people’ allows for elaborate cultural celebrations, such as fasting in the month of Ramadhan and the
celebration of Eid after the fasting month. Such meaningful and friendly celebrations are likely to occur in traditional and mature societies. Therefore, five out of nine respondents make it a must to spend the first day of Eid in their parental homes every year.

Amidst the stories painted in such a positive light, one respondent felt out of place as she originates from a different culture. PH4 (female, aged in 50s, Kayan) is a Muslim convert who married a Malay and resided with her in-laws prior to entering public housing. Born a Kayan, PH4 used to have difficulties adapting to the Malay kampong environment which she found ‘more rigid’ than her previous life before coming to live in the kampong. The contrast was most apparent during cultural celebrations, in which, she reflected, the Malay ways of celebration are more ‘contained’ whereas the Kayan’s ways are more ‘expressive’ with songs and dances and always last until late at night. Nevertheless, over time, PH4 has acculturated into the Malay ways of life through regular first-hand contact with the host community, while maintaining some aspects of her origin and identity.

The good cohesion found in Malay traditional villages does not necessarily translate in relatively modern residential areas. For one respondent, the lack of friendship ties was attributed to the design of the residential estate. In the low-cost housing estate, houses are separated by fenced boundaries. This is unlike the layout of the Malay traditional villages where the layout is very informal, as indicated by the absence of boundary markers like fences (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006, p. 305). The design of modern housing neglects this criterion and emphasises housing privacy. As such, interactions were infrequent unless residents purposely went to the neighbour’s. Even then, the interactions are not indicative of good social cohesion, as suggested in the following quotation:

PH7: There [the low-cost residential area in Semariang], we were less friendly with our neighbours...

Mother: Furthermore, the distance between the houses are quite far [compared to public housing]. If we didn’t purposely go there to the neighbour’s house, we didn’t [get to interact with them].

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6 Most Kayan in Sarawak are Christian and originally from the Belaga, a small district located upriver from Sibu, another major town in Sarawak. It is largely a rural area where most employment is from timber industries.
PH7: It is normal in standard terraced houses [because of the fences], right? (PH7, single mother, aged in 20s, formerly resided in parental home in low-cost housing estate)

According to PH7 (female, aged in 20s, single mother, fully employed), the interactions in the low-cost neighbourhood in Semariang, appeared superficial and did not result in reciprocity. While her counterparts in the Malay villages could rely on their neighbours to care for their children (at a minimal cost if any), PH7 had to rely on a paid carer to take care of her four children, aged between two and eight. Her situation echoes the work of Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2136) who argue that the significance of the neighbourhood is dependent on a family’s life-course. In other words, because PH7 was busy working to support four children, she could not afford to develop better friendship ties with the former community (which often entails reciprocity) compared to other stay-at-home mothers I interviewed.

**Amongst former residents of private rental housing**

Contrary to traditional villages, social cohesion is relatively lacking in private rental housing situations. In general, the lack of social cohesion in this tenure type undermines interviewees’ sense of belonging to the community, although there are some exceptions as captured in their stories. High turnover of residents in private rental accommodation profoundly contributes to the lack of social ties. Given the state of tenants’ disadvantages and dissatisfactions highlighted in Section 4.3, it is to be expected that tenure would be relatively shorter in this housing type. Some occupants in the shop houses however, had become long term tenants due to locational advantage.

The following discussion provides the accounts gathered from rooming tenants. When asked about their sense of neighbourliness, most interviewees indicated somewhat neutral relationships, in the sense that contacts were limited to casual greetings sufficient to acknowledge each other’s presence. There were occasional exchanges of fresh produce or home cooked food but the occurrences were rare. Some interviewees appreciated how the neighbours ‘did not poke their noses into other people’s businesses’. This means that tenants in rooming facilities tended to keep to themselves. This behaviour was attributed to
the regular change of tenant composition that undermined the sense of familiarity and predictability needed to create good friendship ties.

Out of the 18 respondents who used to reside in private rental housing, only two indicated good and dependable relationships with their neighbours. Their sense of belonging was developed over the significant amount of time spent residing next to, or nearby, each other. The interactions and favours included lending each other money, demonstrating the importance of social ties to help one another get by (see Henning & Lieberg, 1996). To a certain extent, the relationships were associated with sibling-like bonding. Here is an interviewee talking about her former neighbour:

She was very nice. Every time she returned from Sabah, she brought us a lot of things – seafood and different kinds of vegetables. During Eid, she gave us things. I did the same for her during Gawai. She was like family. Whenever her children came over to our place, I didn’t have to serve them. They helped themselves. If they said they wanted something [to eat], I told them to go ahead... (RE4, female, aged in 50s, rented a shop house for 3 years)

This example shows that given enough time, it is possible to develop strong social cohesion in this housing category. However, I also need to stress that longer tenancy in private rental housing can only occur with better housing circumstances. In both cases cited in this paragraph, interviewees either resided in a self-contained dwelling or they had good landlords.

This study also found that the extent to which people are able to keep up communication with community members is very much dependent on their life stages. According to one childless couple, the room they rented only served as a resting place after a day’s work. The young couple decided to make full use of their time earning money before starting a family. The long hours at work limited their communication with their neighbours but the limited communication did not seem to bother them, because the environment suited the purpose they expected of the dwelling. A similar reason was also shared by RO4 (Malay, female, aged in 40s, single mother) who worked long hours to support her family. Her circumstances coincided with PH7, another single mother (see page 126); both had little attachment to the community due to their job commitments.
Tenants who rented in traditional villages were also experiencing isolation, potentially because they were new there. Most cited having casual interaction with other residents in the host community, but without the elements of reciprocity, suggesting lack of attachment to the local community by the newcomers, and vice versa:

...we didn’t really interact with the neighbours because the houses were far away. They [neighbours] were not really friendly with us maybe because we were new there... The house closest to ours was empty. On the other side, houses were far away, so yes, we didn’t talk to our neighbours much. (RE9, female, aged in 20s, single mother in an extended household)

While the narrative above does not suggest purposeful acts by the village locals to exclude the newcomers, my later communication by phone with PH7 (female, aged in 20s, single mother), who was evicted from public housing several months after our interview took place, offered some insight into this. This is my account from my field notes about her lack of attachment to the new community:

Due to a huge sum of rental arrears accumulated by her brother, PH7’s extended household of 11 members were evicted from public housing. Within a month, they relocated into a rental property in a traditional village. According to PH7, she was very unhappy residing in the village as the neighbours often found fault with her. She recalled an incident when she was asked to park her car at the end of the village as the space nearby her rented place was someone else’s regular spot. She shared how people there could be very selfish and inconsiderate. They seemed to take ‘special interest’ in her status as a single mother. Despite experiencing overcrowding in public housing, it was a much better place because of the friendly neighbours. At the time of our conversation, she was actively seeking ways to re-enter public housing but to no avail because the distribution policy does not give priority to single mothers.

Apart from highlighting what could have triggered seclusion in a traditional village (being a newcomer or being a single mother), this account strengthens this thesis’s statement that people’s past experiences in their housing are paramount in influencing their sense of home in their current housing. Specifically, PH7’s experience highlights the unfavourable
experience in her new housing, characterised by unfriendly neighbours which led to her sense of isolation in the village. In return, the sense of homeliness that she had in the past was tied to her good-natured neighbours. This demonstrates that the experiences of home are context-specific and that the sense of home is not set in stone; in fact these things are always changing, responding to people’s housing circumstances.

### Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements

Despite the fact they were often threatened by the Land and Survey Department through repeated eviction procedures, interviewees’ sense of belonging to the community in the squatter settlements was generally strong. This strong attachment was evidenced by the positive effects of cultural similarity and by also by the fact that some families in the squatter settlements were related. To recap, the squatter settlements identified in this thesis are identified by race: Siol Kandis is home to the Iban, Sungai Tapang is mainly occupied by the Bidayuh, and Taman Won, a settlement on private land, is home to the Malay. The advantages of residing with people of similar culture are reflected in their daily interactions:

> Our neighbours in Siol Kandis are Iban. People surrounding us are Iban. We don’t mix with other races. So, in Siol Kandis we often call out to each other [shouting loudly] like ‘...ooooooiiii!’ And there was no issue when we played our radio cassette loudly [in the squatter settlement] but in public housing we need to respect the other [races] as well. (SQ6, male, aged in 50s, former resident of Siol Kandis squatter settlement)

This freedom of expression also translated into the practices of social gatherings in Sungai Tapang and Siol Kandis. Residents were free to celebrate important events such as Gawai\(^7\) (ngiling tikai), Christmas, New Year’s Eve or weddings that are normally celebrated in the Iban or Bidayuh traditional villages. The celebrations show that although they were isolated

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\(^7\) Gawai is considered the most important event for the Dayak (a generic name for native races, including Iban, Bidayuh and Kayan) in Sarawak. There are two parts of the Gawai celebration – the opening of Gawai and the closing of Gawai or better known as ngiling tikai in Iban. The opening of Gawai is often celebrated in traditional villages or longhouses; hence respondents usually head back to their respective villages to celebrate this. The celebration of ngiling tikai in traditional villages is relatively smaller; hence it is often celebrated in the current place of residence.

129
from their traditional longhouses\(^8\) or kampongs, the traditional culture prevailed (including their social structure). In many instances, the gatherings involved rituals, songs, dances and alcoholic drinks. They were indifferent about their neighbours’ feelings or acceptance since everyone in the squatter settlements was part of the celebrations. The following extract is a close illustration of what is expected in a Gawai celebration. Due to the elaborate nature of this celebration, interviewees perceived that Gawai is best celebrated in an area where everyone shares the same culture. In Chapter Five, we shall learn how the celebrations are modified following their relocation into public housing.

The Gawai Dayak is a celebration for the Dayak community. This is an occasion where the Dayaks visit their relatives and friends commonly known as *ngabang* in local Iban language. The celebration starts on the 31 May every year with a ceremony called *antu rua*, a ritual to cast away evil spirits. In the evening, another ceremony called *ming* (offering) takes place accompanied by ritual music. Dinner is then served and all those present are expected to talk and mingle. At midnight, a procession is performed to welcome the god of fertility called *Ngaju Petara* up and down the longhouse. The chief of the longhouse then will lead the drinking of wine called *tuak*. The 1\(^{st}\) of June is the day of Gawai, the homes of the Dayaks are opened for visitors. The *bebiau pangabang* ceremony is performed by the chief of the longhouse to all visitors. As usual *tuak* will be served. The celebration turns merrier with traditional dances and music. (Ishak, 2010, p. 106)

A similar appreciation for a meaningful and friendly celebration of Eid was expressed by SQ3 (Malay, male, aged in 60s) who formerly resided at Taman Won. Taman Won is a relatively small squatter settlement comprising of six houses, where the households are related. Although their former house is no longer habitable, SQ3 and his wife always return to Taman Won to celebrate Eid with their old neighbours every year. They too, often return to the settlement to gather fruits from their trees or to forage. From their stories, I gather that they are still attached to their friends and relatives at Taman Won, given the time they have spent together in the past and the fact that they are related.

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\(^8\) Longhouse is a form of communal dwelling unique to Sarawak. A longhouse is can have around three to 40 family apartments put together, side by side (like terrace linked houses). These apartments share a common verandah (*ruai*) (Yea, 2002, p. 3). Cultural events such as Gawai Dayak, are often carried out the *ruai*. 

130
Informal social control is an important characteristic of the squatter settlements. According to SQ8 (female, aged in 20s, single) who had lived in Siol Kandis since she was very young, it was normal for her neighbours to drink alcohol on weekends or during special occasions, but never did they cause harm to others or their belongings due to the social control practices in the community:

So far in the number of years I spent living in the squatter settlement... I had been living there since I was young. I went to the primary school nearby and we never experienced [break-ins]. Although people there drink regularly on weekends, we hardly came across these sorts of things [crime, nuisance or disturbances]. (SQ8, female, 20s, formerly resided in Siol Kandis squatter settlement)

Furthermore, the practice of housewives staying outdoors regularly (due to thermal discomfort inside their dwellings), as mentioned previously, can be seen as another ‘mechanism’ of informal social control. Being in the open allows them to be aware of any changes, including the presence of strangers (with or without ill intentions) in their neighbourhood and this helps to deter crime in the area. This is akin to Jacobs’s (1961) influential work, in which she suggested that a lively street promotes neighbourhood safety as regular users can act as ‘street watchers and sidewalk guardians’ (p. 89).

Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters

In the workers’ quarters, three out of four respondents reported a sense of belonging to their respective communities, despite these communities being comprised of a variety of ethnicities. QR2’s positive experience residing in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood is traced in the following account:

It was more pleasant living in the area with the Iban, Malay or Chinese. I had no problem chatting with them. There was no issue. Ever since we moved to Sri Wangi [all Muslims, mostly Malay], we have heard lots of ‘funny’ [unpleasant] things.

We were all SESCO [a state subsidiary energy company] staff. People were more disciplined there. We were mixed then, but I liked interacting with the people [there]. In fact, we were okay with our Chinese neighbours. (QR2, male, aged 60s, retired security guard, used to reside in SESCO quarters)
In other words, respondents found attachment in the harmonious living environment despite cultural diversity. As shown in the quotation above, being with people from a similar culture (in public housing) does not necessarily bring about a harmonious living environment. In fact, sharing a similar workplace could create better bonding than ethnicity alone. In this setting, bonding may have been established at the workplace and continued at the place of residence. Likewise, any relationship established in the residential area could enhance bonding at the workplace. However, it has to be noted that potential conflicts at either place could also translate into the working and home, and potentially sever bonding. These effects however, are not remarked upon in this thesis.

Furthermore, the housing policy that governs workers’ quarters only requires tenants to leave the facility upon retirement or after they become homeowners in the same district. In other words, the policy underpins a low turnover of community members, allowing residents to form friendships or possibly strong cohesion in the housing complexes. One interviewee was an exception. Despite 21 years spent in the barracks with his co-workers, QR1 (Malay, male, aged in 50s) often felt out of place because his family were the only Malay Muslims in the community. The rest were Iban who were non-Muslim. Being a minority in the barracks meant tolerating the lifestyles of their neighbours that contradicted their own values. It became very unsettling when they had to experience practices forbidden in their own religion through sight, smell and sound. These practices included the roasting of pork and consumption of alcohol, often in the open:

QR1: The main problem there is cooking. They often roast that ‘thing’ [pork]. We can’t complain because that is their rights. But the smell…! Sometimes, it was two or three times in a month!

Wife: When they roast [pork] outside, the smell travels into your house because of the wind. They killed and cut the ‘thing’ on site! There are times when we lost our appetite for days.

QR1: Aduuuuuuh! What can you say? You are the minority. You still need to respect them because that is their culture. (QR1, male, aged in 50s, resided in workers quarters for 21 years prior to demolition)
QR1 admitted they needed to respect the culture of his neighbours who were also his co-workers, to avoid potential conflicts. As a minority, he perceived that his voice carried no weight. In other words, until his family left the barracks, they had to continue to tolerate the sights and the smells from the activities that caused them to feel very uncomfortable, even though they kept themselves indoors most of the time. Accordingly, the feeling of isolation explains QR1’s strong desire to leave the barracks but he had little opportunity to do so as private rental accommodation was too expensive for his already stretched budget. This explains his family’s weekly visits to his parents in Kuching city where they could relate to people of their own ethnicity. They felt they belonged more there.

The sub-section that follows discusses the findings of this section in relation to previous studies. The discussion section also includes the ways in which the insight that home is porous and multi-scalar allows me to make sense of interviewees’ accounts critically.

**Discussion**

With the exception of the interviewees who used to reside in private rental housing, respondents tended to narrate a sense of commitment and belonging to their former communities. They presented their sense of belonging to the community as strengthened by the length of their residence there and being in a group of similar ethnicity. Alienation, on the other hand, was attributed to the little time spent in a community (this includes high turnover in private rental accommodation) or from being somewhat ‘different’ to other members of the community. The following discussion covers each factor by relating them to previous studies.

Time is an important factor that shapes social bonding in this thesis. Social cohesion was found to be strong in traditional villages, squatter settlements and the workers’ quarters given the long-term residence of interviewees in these housing arrangements. On the contrary, shorter periods of residence in private rentals led to a lack of social cohesion in this tenure. This finding concurs with the idea that high turnover of residents undermines social networks, lowers interaction between people and diminishes trust (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001; Livingston et al., 2010). More importantly, this thesis locates other mediating reasons, along with the time factor, that tie people to their local community. That is, social bonding in traditional villages and squatter settlements is strengthened by...
residents’ blood ties, while work relations seem to have positive effects on social bonding in the workers’ quarters.

Moving on, I shall discuss the ways in which cultural similarity shapes social ties in this thesis. The effects of cultural similarity can be observed in traditional communities. The positive effects of sharing a similar culture are reflected in interviewees’ stories about elaborate cultural celebrations and exchanges of assistance in the community. On the contrary, being a minority (in this thesis, this means coming from a different culture, being a newcomer in a kampong or being a single mother) has caused some interviewees to feel socially isolated, echoing Halpern (1993). In the literature, cultural difference has been the mostly cited reason for isolation but several respondents in this study advised that being culturally similar does not guarantee bonding for some groups of people. This is shown in the experiences of some Malay tenants who used to rent in traditional Malay villages (who are regarded as outsiders by the local village community) and among single mothers who carry a ‘stigmatised’ social status.

The findings of this thesis are also that social isolation is attributable to one’s life-stage. This notion is exemplified by the stories shared by two fully employed single mothers, who find it hard to maintain good ties with their neighbours as they spend more time working, hence, little effort is made to interact with the local community. Through their jobs, their circle of friends goes beyond the local community, implying like Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2133) that people in the workforce could be more engaged in extra local ties than in local ties. It is expected that they place more reliance on their peers at work or on paid services than relying on the local community. A childless couple who decided to spend most of their time working before starting a family also found themselves detached from their neighbours.

Resonating with a recent study in the United States where low income families found common ground in racially diverse neighbourhoods (Darrah & DeLuca, 2014), this thesis observes a similar effect in the workers’ quarters. It has to be noted however, that the workers’ quarters in this study host a mixed income community (i.e. staff of different ranks reside in the same housing complex) and bonding between community members is shaped by their work relations and by their long-term tenancy in the housing facility. For this reason, heterogeneity alone may not be sufficient to explain cohesion. Rather, its effects
have to be observed in the presence of other mediating factors, such as sharing the same workplace.

Next, we shall explore the effects of strong ties in the community. The most prevalent evidence is informal social control, a mechanism found in the kampongs and the squatter settlements. This mechanism enhances interviewees’ sense of personal safety, which is traced in their stories about the monitoring of children, caring for the elderly as well as curbing crime in the neighbourhoods. These findings concur with an existing study reported in Silver & Miller (2004, p. 554), focusing on communities in Great Britain where local friendships reduce the prevalence of crime in neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the nature of the assistance that occurs in this thesis reflects Forrest and Kearn’s (2001, p. 2140) comment that social support is rendered to achieve mutual or one-sided benefits, with the expectation for reciprocation in later times of need. It is also argued that where there is a general lack of efficiency by certain authorities, community commitment is needed to fill in the gaps (Bardo, 1984). Again, this rings true in the context of Sarawak, where the state has limited resources to ensure safety or to provide adequate welfare services to the people.

With respect to the application of the insights of the critical geographies of home, this thesis demonstrates the porosity of the home by using the perception of personal safety resulting from the effects of social cohesion and informal social control, to show how the domestic is shaped by the extra-domestic. The stories in this section suggest that interviewees who used to reside in traditional villages or squatter settlements (where community bonding is stronger) reported having peace of mind knowing their loved ones were being watched over by the community members in their ‘absence’. In a different example, the porosity of the home is again demonstrated when one respondent from the workers’ quarters could not find solitude in his own home and was ‘forced’ to tolerate cultural practices that contradict his own religion even though the practices took place outside the confines of his dwelling.

The fact that home is multi-scalar is evident in this thesis through the interviewees’ strong ties with their local community members. In traditional villages and squatter settlements, everyone seems to be familiar with each other and perhaps it is not too much to claim that everyone knows everyone in their respective neighbourhoods. In other words, their circle of friends or sense of belonging to the village or squatter settlement may cover the entire
settlement. Similarly, work relations enhance social ties in the workers’ quarters; therefore, a multi-scalar home in this former housing occurs in the housing complex and also in the workplace.

At this point, I can conclude that most of the experiences that shape interviewees’ sense of belonging to their former communities are pleasant, suggesting that their past neighbourhoods appear to be more homely than their dwelling units. Given the fact that many interviewees voluntarily left their old places of residence (except for those who used to reside in the workers’ quarters) and relocated into public housing, it appears that the sense of homeliness associated with their former community was not sufficient to make them stay rooted there. Their emphasis is placed more on their sense of homeliness inside the dwelling than in the neighbourhood. This finding strongly resonates Anton and Lawrence (2014) who argue that people tend to have stronger attachment towards their dwellings than towards their neighbourhood.

Next, we shall learn how a sense of home in the neighbourhood, reflected in people’s belonging to place, materialises in interviewees’ different housing histories.

4.4.2 Sense of belonging to place

This section explores the ways in which interviewees’ sense of belonging, or lack of it (alienation) occurred in relation to their former physical neighbourhood.

**Amongst former residents of the parental homes**

For interviewees who used to reside in their parental homes in traditional villages, the sense of familiarity with the village and the surrounding areas generates a sense of belonging to place. The Malay traditional villages captured in this study are located adjacent to Kuching city. Therefore, interviewees had convenient access to services and facilities, including clinics and schools. In this section, I present PH6’s (female, aged in 70s, formerly resided in Kampong Ajibah Abol) story to illustrate people’s attachment to place. In this elderly person’s narrative, Kampong Ajibah Abol was central to everything that mattered to her.

If I still stayed there [Kampong Ajibah Abol], it would be very convenient for me. The town was nearby [walking distance]. It was easy for me to shop or go to the
polyclinic. When my daughters were in town, they dropped by regularly but that hardly happens now [since I moved into public housing]. (PH6, female, aged in 70s, formerly resided in Kampong Ajibah Abol for 60 years)

The strategic location of the village enabled her to frequent the polyclinic independently for her regular check-up. Her sense of home in the kampong also meant frequent visits by her daughters who found it convenient to drop by at their mother’s whenever they were in town. Furthermore, PH6 was extremely familiar with the village environment and she needed little help going about the village whenever she visited her neighbours or relatives. In other words, the familiar surroundings of the village had enabled PH6 to be mobile and independent despite her old age (see Sixsmith & Sixsmith, 2008 for more on ‘ageing in place’ at home). Contrary to many respondents in this past housing category who were more than happy to move into public housing, PH6 was very reluctant to do so. She regarded herself as being forcibly taken out of her comfort zone.

**Amongst former residents of private rental housing**

Interviewees who used to reside in private rental housing are able to provide rich accounts regarding their sense of belonging to place. The favourable accounts however, are more apparent among interviewees who formerly rented in shop houses in commercial areas, than in other housing types belonging to this tenure. In general, interviewees who used to reside in shop houses had good and convenient access to retail, workplaces and schools. Their children could conveniently walk to school. Out of the six interviewees who formerly resided in shop houses, two were able to generate steady income from these strategic locations while the other four found it convenient to commute to their workplaces. This was one of the reasons that kept RO3, a home-based seamstress, in her rented room for eight years in Satok. The location of the rented room was easily accessible for her clients. Furthermore, being in the location reduced RO3’s responsibilities as a home-maker. Instead of cooking, she could easily purchase cooked food from stall operators downstairs. The convenience allowed her to concentrate on her sewing, ensuring a steady flow of income. Her belonging to place meant different forms of benefits gained from being in the location, resulting in RO3’s financial independence:
It was different in Satok. Whenever my clients went out or had lunch, they would drop by at my place to pick up the clothes. It was easy for them.

My clients collected their clothes every 2-3 days, which means I received payment every 2-3 days. I could finish sewing 4-5 pieces of clothes daily but here [in public housing] I could only concentrate on them during weekends. (RO3, female, aged in 30s, resided in rented room for 8 years)

For RE4 (female, aged in 50s) who operated an informal snack stall nearby her rented apartment, she usually frequented grocery stores in the neighbourhood to obtain raw materials for use in her business. The convenient access of her apartment to her stall and raw materials saved her time, allowing her to make different varieties of snacks for sale, therefore permitting her to earn more income. Here, proximity to urban opportunities is the key to gainful employment, and this is noted in both RO3’s and RE4’s narratives and can be seen in Figure 4.6.

**Figure 4.6: Income generating opportunities in the neighbourhood**

(Left) RE4 and her husband used to reside on the top floor of this building. She purchased raw materials for her snack stall from ‘Teck Kong Trading’ located on the ground floor. (Right) RE’s stall was similar to the one shown in the picture. It was erected on a parking lot (opposite her dwelling), using a canopy and some tables assembled together on which to place her cooking utensils and to display the snacks. The stall was positioned to make it convenient for motorists to purchase the snacks without leaving their cars.

Amidst these positive experiences, residing in a location that is central to everything entails certain challenges. In this setting, issues concerning personal security were often reported by interviewees. Several respondents cited personal encounters with robbery, house break-ins or intoxicated people in the neighbourhood, causing them to feel unsafe inside or
outside their dwellings especially at night. As matter of fact, these issues triggered RE4 to leave the neighbourhood despite the thriving business she had:

It happened at the shop house. We rented upstairs. I was about to go up the stairs when my bag was snatched from behind, around midnight. I chased after him. I returned from the police station around 4.00 or 5.00 in the morning after the police report. I couldn’t stay there [at the apartment] anymore. Although the door was grilled, they could still break into the house. They came in through the roof [ceiling]. My belongings often went missing. I didn’t feel safe living there. During our 3 years tenure, I couldn’t wait to leave the place. (RE4, female, aged in 50s, rented a shop house for 3 years)

It is clear in the comment that RE4 did not feel safe enough to continue residing in her rented apartment. Her story reinforces the idea that the sense of home is not separate from the public domain. Similarly, the experiences of home inside the dwelling are responsive to the events that occur in the wider world, as we shall observe in this next story.

Perhaps the most terrifying experience was reported by RE3 (female, aged in 30s), who rented a kampong house for four years with her in-laws in a crime-laden Malay village in Kuching. She recalled how their safety was threatened by incidents of drug abuse, anti-social behaviour and regular police operations to hunt down criminals in the village. The effects of the disturbances penetrated into the dwelling, undermining the function of the home as a site of protection. The village was labelled as ‘problematic’, ‘black area’ and ‘notorious’ by outsiders. As RE3 recalls:

We were lucky to leave the place. Not long after we left, our [former] front neighbour’s son hung himself. There was once he set the house on fire. I could not stay there. My brother, who is a prison warden in Miri, asked me to move out from the village. He said the area is bad, it is a ‘hot spot’ and infested with drug addicts. I agree with him. (RE3, female, aged in 30s, rented in a ‘notorious’ kampong with her extended family)
RE3’s story clearly illustrates her lack of attachment to the village. Her narrative seem to be in agreement with the stigma attached to the kampong, adding that the area was unsuitable to bring up a family due to the various negative factors. This was unlike the results reported in Christmann (2013) where the urban pioneers in Germany captured in her study, resisted the stigma attached to their (deprived) neighbourhoods using their own positive experiences. RE3 had no positive stories to offer about the kampong. In fact, the description of this particular village contradicts the favourable stories that we have learned thus far about traditional villages. I did not explore the reasons for these negative associations with the village, but RE3 and her family’s predicaments could be related to their status as ‘outsiders’ in the kampong.

In terms of accessibility to services, respondents who formerly rented in traditional villages or new housing areas had less access to materials and social resources. This disadvantage was primarily linked to their ability to afford only the cheaper rental properties in more distant and less developed locations. Several respondents were unhappy with the quality of the surrounding environment due to its insufficient infrastructure. According to RE2 (male, aged in 30s) who formerly rented in a low cost housing estate in an isolated location, the road leading to his rented place was without street lighting and surrounded by secondary forest. It was difficult for him to travel home at night on his motorcycle and the situation eroded his sense of security. The rented house was too far from his workplace (yet he admitted it was far better than residing in the parental home) and he put in tremendous efforts to gain entry into public housing. He left the private rental property in less than a year.

RE2’s detachment from the area was apparent because the rented house was treated by him as a transitional place prior to entry to public housing. While it may take years for applicants to gain entry into public housing, he admitted receiving assistance, hence his much shorter wait time. His positive outlook towards the promised entry into public housing had the effect of diluting his attachment to the low-cost housing estate. Higgit and Memken (2001) note that neighbourhood satisfaction is tied to one’s perception that their new

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9 In this study, urban pioneers are defined as newcomers who bring something new to the area. They are rich with cultural and social capital, but not necessarily economic capital. The urban pioneers identified in Christmann (2013) are artists or agents of change who capitalise the area or neighbourhood for their own interests.
neighbourhood is better than the former. As such, it can also be argued that one’s mindset about a future neighbourhood with better criteria, e.g. more affordable public housing which is closer to the work place, and with the real possibility of obtaining such housing – could equally weaken satisfaction and belonging towards the current neighbourhood, as shown in the case of RE2.

**Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements**

Unlike the other housing arrangements, squatter settlements are generally more isolated. In many instances, the remote location undermines interviewees’ sense of belonging to the area. Most of the squatter settlements captured in this study are rather secluded, except Taman Won. In general, respondents were familiar with the location and were aware of the different means to access services in the area. However, being familiar with the whereabouts of the services did not entail adequate access to those services. Such experiences are shared by women who used to reside in Sungai Tapang, detailing their long walks to the main road as a major barrier to get to various services outside the settlements (see Figure 4.7). From my own experience, the journey was about ten minutes by car and there was no street lighting. Children’s transportation to school however, was not compromised, suggesting the high priority placed on their education.

SQ1’s (female, aged in 40s, formerly resided in Sungai Tapang squatter settlement) recalls the dilemma she faced when dealing with the challenges of accessing healthcare services in Sungai Tapang: should she rely on her husband who was only available after hours or should
she hire a vehicle? The former may result in missing the operating hours of a nearby government polyclinic (where the healthcare service is free) and one has to turn to a private clinic instead. The latter exerts strain on the already tight family budget. She could not ask her husband to return home early because that would mean a reduction in that day’s salary as he is paid daily. Eventually, most interviewees hired a vehicle as the fare was much cheaper than the costs of consultation and medicine at a private clinic. This arrangement on the other hand, relied on the driver’s or vehicle’s availability. Thus, interviewees implied they had limited control over access to services especially in unplanned situations. It is often the case that women were the parties who had to negotiate the consequences of the unfavourable location of their housing.

Some squatter settlements like Siol Kandis and Taman Won are found in relatively better locations. For example, Taman Won is located adjacent to a mature suburb in Kuching north and Siol Kandis is located next to a primary school, though its location is still secluded. As such, parents in Siol Kandis saved a lot in terms of children’s transportation to school. But for very poor families, even the cheapest public transport fare could be a burden with more children. For example, in one respondent’s case (SQ8, female, aged in 40s, formerly resided in a garbage landfill for 14 years), she preferred walking her children to school in order to save on the fares even if it meant going on foot for one kilometre on a busy major road. The ability to minimise transportation costs made her felt confident residing in the landfill despite the precarious living conditions there. However, she often worried about her children’s safety due to the absence of established walking ways like footpaths (see Figure 4.8). As such, the trade-off in the location appears to be ambivalent; it was cheaper to travel to school but that also meant exposing her children to danger on their daily walk to school.
Figure 4.8: Risky journey to school

SQ8 and her three sons walked on this main road to get to school. As shown in the picture, there is no footpath and they had no choice but to walk on the road shoulder or nature strip. The walk could be more challenging on rainy days. The daily journey could be risky with the presence of heavy vehicles. SQ8 made it a point to walk them every day following the death of another son who was knocked down by a car on one of his routine walks to school.

(Image is sourced from google.com)

I shall now explore how the sense of belonging to place relates to certain daily practices significant to specific cultures. In the Iban and Bidayuh traditional villages, the sense of belonging to their neighbourhood is enhanced through gardening and foraging activities. It is common to see regularly consumed plants and herbs cultivated around the houses. The practices of gardening and foraging continued in the squatter settlement and this gave the respondents a sense of familiarity with the lifestyle that they were used to, though in a different setting. Both practices gave respondents good access to home grown or wild food resources, allowing them to put fresh food on the table at minimal cost.

Figure 4.9: Gardening and foraging in the squatter settlements

(Left) Various types of daily consumed plants are cultivated at the side of this house in Siol Kandis. In the picture, there are tapioca leaves, yam and galangal. (Right) SQ8’s daughter and son are trying their luck looking for wild sweet potatoes in a former landfill where they used to dwell.
Foraging was also an important daily practice in another respondent’s life: SQ8 was highly dependent on the garbage landfill that her family had occupied for 14 years prior to their move into public housing. Apart from collecting scrap metals and aluminium cans for sale from the familiar surroundings of the landfill, SQ8 also managed to make a living from foraging in the second-growth forest surrounding the landfill. Knowing she had easy access to wild food enabled her to strategise for her household’s survival. She worried less about their day-to-day survival when they were still living in the garbage landfill:

At times when we had no money, I can tell you straightaway that if we look for vegetables [foraging] or anything else, we could still get money for expenses. We could still, like what people say, survive... (SQ8, female, aged in 40s, formerly resided in a garbage landfill for 14 years)

Given this relatively easy access to income sources, SQ8 moved into public housing with much regret. Her reluctance was clearly expressed in our interview, not only because she had to leave a place of familiarity but also because she had difficulties adjusting to the life in public housing (which will be explored in the next chapter). Some interviewees returned to the squatter settlements to forage, implying that the activity must have been very meaningful to them in the past (Milligan, 1998, p. 10).

**Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters**

The sense of belonging to place appears to be very strong among tenants who used to reside in workers’ quarters, primarily because the quarters are located in guarded complexes and therefore, this former housing is reported to exhibit better safety and security than the other neighbourhoods covered in this thesis. The tight security in the housing estates controlled the presence of strangers in the neighbourhood. It reduced the potential occurrence of crime; in return, it enhanced occupants’ good perception of personal security in the area. Such also were the experiences of growing children who found it safe to interact with their peers in the housing complexes, where juvenile delinquency and anti-social behaviours were rare. According to one interviewee, her children often voiced their desire to return to the old neighbourhood – indicating that the former place was more homely than the current one, in their memories.
The quarters were found in locations where access to commercial and social services were convenient. Therefore, it is not surprising when interviewees in this category cited positive lived experiences of home inside and outside their dwellings. Contrary to these favourable narratives, QR2 (male, aged in 50s, resided in workers quarters for 21 years) was quick to strategise for residential relocation when he was given a notice to leave the barracks when they were scheduled for demolition in 2010. As stated in the previous section, he had little sense of attachment to the community. The lack of sense of belonging was compounded by the isolated location of the barracks, as he commented:

There was nothing there. What do you expect? We [literally] lived on a forest reserve. There was story behind it – there used to be illegal dwellings. After the illegal houses were cleared, the department feared that the area will be disturbed [sic] again. If one person builds a house in there, others will follow suit and the place would end up becoming a squatter settlement. That was the reason why the barracks were there. It was as if we were there to take care of the forest. (QR1, male, aged in 50s, resided in workers quarters for 21 years)

It is important to note that QR1 grew up in a Malay traditional village close to Kuching city. The social and physical environment and location of the barracks was a huge contrast to the life he used to know. Being in an isolated location meant difficult access to commercial and social services. Although it was advantageous for him in terms of the short travel time to his workplace, the locational disadvantages significantly affected his sense of belonging to the area.

**Discussion**

I shall now discuss the findings of this section in light of previous studies and how interviewees’ stories about their sense of belonging to their former neighbourhood (place) can be framed using the insights that a sense of home is porous and multi-scalar.

Being in a neighbourhood of certain characteristics affects people’s sense of belonging to place. There are two themes that frame the narratives, namely meaningful locations and the perception of crime in the neighbourhood. Across the four housing histories, the sense of belonging to place was found to be strongest in traditional villages due to both the favourable locations and low rates of crime reported there. In the other housing histories,
the sense of belonging to place appears to be ambivalent. In brief, tenants who used to rent in commercial areas benefitted from the strategic location of their dwellings but they also felt threatened by incidents of crime in the area. Tenants who could only afford houses in isolated locations were unhappy as it was more difficult for them to access social and material resources. Interviewees who came from the squatter settlements were most deprived in terms of accessibility to services, yet many of them benefitted from the foraging and gardening activities in which they participated there. They also felt secure due to the perceived personal safety they attributed to the casual social surveillance (social control) in the settlements. Finally, interviewees who used to reside in the workers’ quarters were split between those who viewed the locations of the quarters positively and those who did not.

Resonating with findings from past studies, perceptions of crime shape people’s sense of belonging to place (Brown et al., 2004; Bwalya & Seethal, 2014; Darrah & DeLuca, 2014). In the context of this thesis, low-crime areas are found in traditional villages, squatter settlements and workers’ quarters. In Section 4.4.1, the manner in which informal social control contributes to crime prevention in traditional villages and squatter settlements was discussed. In the workers’ quarters, the better perception of personal security is attributed to the practices of housing management that control people’s access into the facility and curb anti-social behaviours. While such conditionality (the ways in which occupants are expected to ‘behave’ in their housing) is often noted in public housing literature (Deacon, 2004; Yau, 2011), this thesis includes the workers’ quarters as another type of housing that is subjected to formal social control. In this study, a reduced sense of bodily safety is not only linked to crime but is also due to the lack of street infrastructure; important to ensure users’ safety in local neighbourhoods. Such deficiencies often occur in low income residential estates located in less mature areas. In Sarawak where funding for public works is scarce (often resulting in neighbourhoods with poor amenities) the poor’s dissatisfaction with an area does not always result in residential mobility. In other words, despite the overwhelming housing deficits, they are likely to be ‘trapped’ in the area (Hiscock et al., 2001) until they find the right opportunity to leave.

Section 4.4.2 explores how the open and multi-scalar home occurs, with regard to the sense of belonging to place. Here, the porosity of the home is demonstrated in the sense that some interviewees in private rental (in shop houses and kampongs) continue to feel unsafe
from living in high risk neighbourhoods even when they are indoors. Although interviewees do not have direct contact with the parties who create the nuisance, they reported that it was unsettling to know the presence of such disturbances in the neighbourhood. The multi-scalar home is also present in interviewees’ narratives about the functionalities of their past neighbourhoods. An appreciation of the convenience of their former neighbourhood was cited by interviewees who used to reside in traditional villages as well as in the shop houses. They had convenient access to social and commercial services. On the contrary, the residents in the squatter settlements were likely to be confined to their immediate surroundings, due to their isolated locations (except for Taman Won). The meaningful surroundings there however, did enable them to strategise for their survival through gardening and foraging activities and this created their sense of belonging to the most immediate neighbourhood.

In their quantitative study, Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) argue that social attachment is stronger than place attachment (p. 279). My thesis agrees with this view, to some extent, by illustrating how interviewees have reported more favourable experiences with the local community than with the physical neighbourhood. Having said this, attachment to the community does not necessarily enhance a sense of belonging to place, primarily because most interviewees voluntarily left their former housing. Therefore, the notion purported in some studies that strong social bonding leads to place attachment (see Kleinhans et al., 2010) is not supported in this thesis. It certainly takes more than just community bonding to create strong attachment to one’s place of residence.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which interviewees experienced a sense of homeliness or unhomeliness in their former dwellings. As noted repeatedly in this chapter, tenants’ sense of home in their former housing is largely shaped by the housing deficits of that former housing. The discussions are framed using the three components of the critical geographies of home advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006). To recap, the components are: home as material and imaginative; the nexus between home, power and identity; and home as open and multi-scalar. The discussions across this chapter demonstrate the idea that the sense of home is multi-scalar. The narratives begin with the discussion of home within the
four walls, followed by how people experience home in the neighbourhood and to some extent, how people feel a sense of belonging from being in certain locations.

At the beginning of this chapter, I argued that interviewees’ housing security – denoted by length of tenure in some of the former housing (e.g. parental home, private rental housing) – does not necessarily make people feel ‘at home’ since most interviewees decided to relocate into public housing. We have seen how the different former housing arrangements that are supposed to be ‘secure’ are in fact, deficient in various aspects but also very affordable. Apart from workers’ accommodation which was withdrawn from residents, the interviewees could have stayed on in their former housing due to their affordability. That means the idea of housing security is not rigidly defined by tenure longevity. This study shows that many interviewees were drawn to their former housing due to its affordability and not necessarily because they could stay there long-term (except for the parental home). This finding shows that housing affordability appears to be an important defining feature of housing security, if not more important than the current popular indicator – tenure longevity. In fact, the further unpacking of this concept (housing security) has been done by Hulse and Milligan (2014).

In their former housing, the necessity to keep a roof over their heads forced the interviewees to make specific trade-offs. Except for those who used to reside in the workers’ quarters or who rented in self-contained accommodation in shop houses, interviewees generally preferred to tolerate their feeling of unhomeliness in their previous housing than to go without shelter. It is true, as detailed in many previously conducted studies, that as one’s household circumstances change, housing needs require adjustment. Unfortunately in the Sarawak context, because of their state of poverty and limited affordable housing options, many low income households had to stay longer than they should have in deficient housing.

Building on the idea that home is a site of control and autonomy and that a sense of home also involves privacy and comfort, the feelings of unhomeliness inside the dwelling reported in this chapter relate specifically to the housing deficits that interviewees experienced in the past. For example, the experiences of unhomeliness range from not having financial control in parental homes to thermal discomfort in the squatter settlements. The lack of privacy in a
multigenerational household means interviewees are not able to keep certain information from other co-residing households. In a rented room, the lack of privacy occurs when parents are not able to separate their sleeping areas from their children’s. In this sense, home is both material and imaginative; residing in a housing of certain arrangements or forms influences the ways in which the occupants feel homely or unhomely inside the dwelling. Power relations and identity are further important determinants that shape the sense of home, exemplified by gendered expectations in a parental home and the dynamics of landlord-tenant relationships in private rental accommodation. In the Sarawak context, men and women experience a sense of home differently, but due to gendered expectations women tend to face more diverse forms of unhomeliness compared to men. Specifically, because women more often stay at home (resonating with the patriarchal culture in Sarawak), they become the consistent ‘actors’ who deal with the sense of unhomeliness resulting from their unfavourable housing circumstances.

Despite the feeling of unhomeliness reported inside the dwelling, there were also experiences of homeliness narrated by the interviewees. For example, tenants who used to reside in the parental home received reliable help in caring for the children, and more importantly, they had free shelter. More favourable experiences of home were reported with regard to their experiences in the former neighbourhood, as well. Essentially though, the feeling of unhomeliness inside the dwelling outweighed the sense of homeliness experienced in the neighbourhood, evidenced by interviewees’ voluntary move into public housing. This resonates with the argument that people need to feel more belonging to their dwelling than to their neighbourhood (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2010). In other words, when the poor need to choose between the two (inside vs. outside), the sense of homeliness inside the dwelling is deemed more important than the sense of homeliness in the neighbourhood or from being in a certain location.

The narratives in this chapter illustrate the different ways that specific housing deficits shape the sense of home experienced by low income families in Sarawak. This is only one part of the story presented in this thesis. As mentioned earlier, the senses of home in past housing reported in this chapter are fundamentally linked to the stories about sense of home in public housing presented in the next chapter. As such, we must now proceed to the
next chapter to learn how interviewees’ lived experiences of home are altered, following their relocation into three-bedroom and two-bathroom units in public housing in Sarawak.
Chapter 5
Analysing the Evidence Part II: Looking to the Past to Discern Sense of Home in Public Housing

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the respondents’ understanding of their sense of home as current tenants in public housing. The stories in this chapter are presented in relation to the sense of home experienced by the respondents in their former housing, as discussed in Chapter Four, consistent with the argument of this thesis that tenants’ senses of home are significantly shaped by their housing histories. This approach echoes Lewin (2001), who argues that home history is a useful entry point to tease out the subjective meanings of home through the ‘description of the home, the surroundings and the general lifestyle’ (p. 364). The ways in which interviewees feel at home in public housing are examined within the notion that home is a site of control and autonomy, home is a site of privacy and comfort and that a sense of home is related to an overall sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Another important aspect included in this chapter is housing governance. While the literature on housing governance often focuses on evictions (Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Hunter & Nixon, 2001; Truman, 2003) and anti-social behaviours (Yau, 2011), this chapter explores the ways in which the practices of maintenance and enforcement by housing managers influence tenants’ sense of home in public housing.

The chapter begins with a discussion on how tenants perceive housing security given their fixed lease in public housing. It then turns to an exploration of senses of home in public housing and these are narrated with specific reference to interviewees’ home histories. At the end of each section, I discuss the findings, in light of contemporary understandings of ‘sense of home’. The section also frames the findings using the critical geographies of home. The concluding section brings together the main findings to demonstrate how housing histories affect sense of home in public housing.
5.2 Housing Security in Public Housing

Keeping in mind the fixed lease applied to public housing tenancy under policy in Sarawak (see Section 1.3.2), it is perhaps not surprising that there were a range of responses to the notion of a sense of housing security in public housing. Some interviewees could not escape from feeling less secure in public housing because of the fixed-term lease. However, the larger proportion of interviewees reported feeling confident about their long-term future in public housing. Despite the temporary lease in the Sarawak context, many interviewees were confident that they could stay on in public housing as long as their rental and utilities payments were up to date. In fact, there were cases where tenants who had reached the maximum tenure were allowed to extend their lease, suggesting that the exit policy was not set in stone. Furthermore, lease terminations have often involved tenants with very poor payment records suggesting this is why they were evicted, not because their lease was overdue.

**Parental homes.** For interviewees who came from parental homes, the sense of housing security in public housing was ambivalent. For them, public housing was a secure option because of the affordable rental yet it was less secure than their previous housing because of the fixed lease (there was no limit to their stay in the parental homes). Respondents who stated these concerns were in fact, approaching their maximum tenure in public housing. Interviewees who exhibited little concern about the tenure time were relatively new to the estates. Generally, more interviewees in this group (the recent arrivals) were confident that they could stay on, although they admitted that the waiting period (for the results of their lease renewal application) could be daunting.

**Private rental housing.** According to interviewees who were formerly in private rental housing, the RM150 (equivalent to AU$50) rental in public housing was very affordable. Some interviewees paid around RM200 to RM300 (equivalent to AUD70 to AUD100) in the past, for a house in a secluded location or for a room in better locations. Therefore, interviewees were more than happy to pay RM150 for a self-contained public housing unit in a reasonably good location. While they had little issue in remitting their rental promptly,

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10 To recap, tenants are required to renew their lease every two years and the maximum tenure in the Sarawak public housing is six years. Tenants need to send in an application to renew their lease a few months before the current lease expires and there are cases where tenants had to wait for months before learning the outcome of the application.
it was the fixed lease that resulted in the mixed responses from this group concerning tenure security in public housing. Some interviewees felt indifferent about the contract and opined that as long as they remitted the rental regularly, they would be able to continue residing in public housing. Some preferred to have a long-term lease or leaving it open ended (similar to their former rented place). They accepted that the fixed lease, though renewable, also meant the possibility for terminations. Either way, interviewees had little choice but to agree on the terms, as they needed affordable and adequate housing. One interviewee however, perceived that the contract secured his family’s position in public housing. This view was driven by a past experience where the absence of a contract permitted the landlord to terminate his lease unfairly when he had fulfilled all the requirements to continue the lease at the property. In his case, the lease was terminated to make room for a higher paying tenant.

**Squatter settlements.** Interviewees who came from squatter settlements had the least sense of housing security in public housing. Despite the improved living conditions, they were burdened by the housing costs and utility bills. It was unlike the situation in the squatter settlements where the costs of living were minimal. For two very poor families, who were relocated due to their uninhabitable housing conditions, two years of rental assistance were provided. The families needed to reapply or seek funds from other sources in order to continue receiving rental aid. The thought of going without rental assistance was very unsettling for both families, given their difficulties in finding affordable housing. As a matter of fact, they, and several other families, spoke about returning to the squatter settlements but this option was not viable given actions under the squatter elimination campaign by the Land and Survey Department (under this policy newly erected houses in the squatter settlements will be demolished).

Here, it became clear that interviewees’ housing histories had shaped their housing expectations. According to one interviewee whose family used to reside in a hut in a garbage landfill, a three-bedroom, two-bathroom concrete flat was ‘too luxurious’. Given their extreme poverty, this family would have settled for a wooden hut on a small piece of land, with access to water and if possible without housing costs. In fact, this expectation was not too distant from the image of the basic hut that had sheltered them for 14 years. This interviewee also stated his reluctance to continue to live in public housing.
**Workers’ quarters.** Interviewees who formerly resided in workers’ quarters expressed confidence in remaining housed in public housing as long as they had good rental payment records. Most interviewees in this category were pensioners, and they were prompt with rental payment. Accordingly, they believed that they stood a good chance to have their lease renewed. Their confidence also derived from the view that being a former employee in a government or semi-government entity, Sarawak Housing Corporation (SHC), would be more considerate of their circumstances (i.e. old age) and housing needs, and that SHC would grant them extensions to continue to live in public housing.

Overall, based on these narratives, tenants’ sense of housing security in public housing were evidently also tied to housing affordability, similar to that implied in the previous chapter. Some interviewees however, felt insecure residing in public housing because the rental was perceived as less affordable to them. This rings true among tenants who used to reside in squatter settlements where housing costs were minimal. Additionally, tenants’ anxiety about the exit policy was mediated by the non-enforcement of the policy. In other words, their sense of housing security was tied to the ways in which housing governance took place in the facility. At this point, there are two dimensions that shape interviewees’ sense of housing security in public housing; housing affordability and housing governance. The possibility of these dimensions in constructing people’s perception of housing security have been explored by Hulse and Milligan (2014) as they re-examined the framework of secure occupancy in the context of private rental housing in Australia. The ways in which housing governance affect tenants’ sense of housing security are provided at length in Section 5.5 of this chapter.

5.3 **Sense of Home within the Four Walls**

Similar to the structure presented in Chapter Four, the sense of home inside the dwelling unit in this chapter is explored using the idea that home is both a site of control and autonomy, and of comfort and privacy. To understand how public housing works in this way, the narratives in this section are framed using the insights that sense of home is both material and imaginative, and influenced by the interplay of power relations and identity in the households (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). With regard to the former (sense of home is both material and imaginative), this chapter explores the ways in which the interviewees feel ‘at home’ and how, in practice, they express the meanings attached to the three-bedroom and
two-bathroom unit. In the latter (sense of home is shaped by power relations and identity), this chapter unpacks how the interviewees’ sense of home in public housing is influenced by family structures and cultural identity.

5.3.1 Exploring the sense of control and autonomy

This section seeks to explore the ways in which control and autonomy materialise in public housing, and these accounts are provided in relation to interviewees’ experiences of control and autonomy in their former housing.

**Amongst former residents of the parental homes**

For households who formerly resided in parental homes, living independently meant they were no longer subject to the expectations shaped by the power relations in a multigenerational household. Here, the sense of home as material and imaginative was demonstrated by the feelings of independence and control that interviewees experienced in their rental unit in public housing. Accordingly, control and autonomy in public housing was materialised in terms of: (i) managing the household economy; and (ii) use of space and activities in the dwelling. The autonomy in managing the household economy meant interviewees were utilising their income to pay only for their own households’ needs, such as utility bills, food items and rental. As one interviewee said:

> Now, one chicken can last us three to four days. No more other mouths to feed... [In the parental home, one chicken only lasted a meal]. That’s the good thing about staying here. (RE2, male, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing, formerly in parental home)

The ability to control household expenses gave interviewees a sense of satisfaction. It also meant the opportunity to save up for their family’s own future. The additional disposable income can also allow tenants to purchase material possessions that can increase their sense of self-worth. According to SQ2, her investments in electrical appliances, described as ‘visible and long lasting’, were better value for money than spending the money on less significant purposes, such as spending on food and utility bills for co-residing members in the parental home:
In the old place [...] money was only used to spend on food. Since we moved here, we could manage our own expenses. We could save. I own several things now [electrical goods]. We are okay; our house is filled with mattresses and some other things. (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, 7 years in public housing, formerly in parental home)

For this group of respondents, being at home in public housing also denoted the freedom to organise space as they wished. In the past, when living in the parental home the ways space was used always involved taking into account the views of other co-residing members. Below, PH4 speaks about the freedom to organise social gatherings in her own unit according to her own culture. This finding agrees with Hiscock et al. (2001, p. 58), who found that renters’ autonomy in housing include their liberty to appropriate space inside their dwellings. In the words of PH4:

Now that we are living on our own, it is okay. We can invite our friends or families to come over for meals on weekends or anytime... Nobody will take offence at us. In the past, I had to take care of my mother-in-law’s feelings. Because I came from a different culture, I didn’t feel comfortable [organising social gathering in the parental home in the past]. (PH4, Kenyah, female, aged in 50s, 6 years in public housing, formerly resided with in-laws’)

Control and autonomy in public housing also meant having the freedom to organise house chores as interviewees saw fit. Several female respondents reported about the taxing household chores they used to perform in the parental homes, so much so that they could not make time to tend to their own families’ needs. Since relocating to public housing, PH3 (Malay, female, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing) had more time to focus on her own family’s needs and she had the opportunity to experience the quiet enjoyment of her home. Similarly for another respondent, having an independent living space gave her the opportunity to pursue her baking interests. In the three-bedroom rental unit, she turned one bedroom into a station where she baked Sarawak layered cakes to generate income (see Figure 5.1).
Figure 5.1: Better time management to focus on other tasks

One interviewee converts one of the bedrooms into her baking station. This arrangement allows her to work from home. She takes orders by phone and arranges for customers to pick up their orders from her place.

Amongst former residents of private rental housing

Consistent with the narratives presented in Chapter Four, tenants who formerly resided in private rental housing experienced the greatest change following their move into public housing. Their new found control and autonomy in public housing included: (i) freedom to perform household chores and/or; (ii) knowing how much they pay for their utilities. The stories in this subsection largely refer to rooming tenants in private rentals, unless indicated otherwise. Most interviewees in this category reported feeling content from being able to cook in their own kitchens and no longer having to wait for their turn to use the washroom. The change was most apparent amongst households with school going children. They no longer need to take baths as early as 4:00 AM (to avoid morning rush hours) as they have access to their own bathrooms in public housing. As would be expected, having their own washing and cooking facilities made it possible for the interviewees to organise their routines more effectively:

Here, it is spacious, more comfortable. I can cook anytime. I don’t have to wait for my turn to cook. The same thing with taking baths... It is more convenient. When I feel like taking a bath, I can just do it straightaway. (RO6, Bidayuh, female, aged in 50s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)
Another cited improvement was that tenants now had access to their individual water and electricity meters. They received monthly bills for their actual use of water and electricity. In the past, they were clueless about the actual costs apart from the figures given by their landlords and many perceived they paid more than they should. More importantly, the knowledge of their actual consumption provided them with the potential to exercise control over electricity or water use:

> With own meter, it is easy. You use more, you pay more. You can control your use.

(RE1, husband and wife, aged in 50s, 2 years in public housing, formerly in rented house with shared meter)

With the utility bills contracted under their own names, respondents now had the freedom to own electrical appliances. In the past, landlords tended to control electricity use by charging tenants for owning each appliance, regardless of their use. Independent access to the utilities combined with the spacious unit permitted interviewees in public housing to own larger electrical appliances to help in performing their household chores. The ownership of electrical appliances among former rooming tenants had increased since they relocated into public housing. Several respondents admitted astronomical increases in their electricity bills and in some cases this resulted in outstanding bills due to uncontrolled use of electricity. It seems that having individual meters may only work favourably for households who are able to control their use. On the other hand, most interviewees reported much cheaper water bills compared to those in their past housing. This reinforces the claim they made about unruly landlords who took advantage of them.

**Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements**

Among the former squatter settlers, the sense of control and autonomy was mainly characterised by regular access to water and electricity, which enabled families to organise their household chores more efficiently. For example, there were no more tedious routines to collect water because water was readily accessible inside their own rental units. Regular access to clean water enabled them to wash, cook and clean without much hesitation, unlike in the past when water rationing was strictly practiced. This respondent speaks for everyone when she commented that the reliable access to water was worth paying for:
How much is the water bill? It is only RM7.00 (less than AUD3.00) per month. Paying RM7.00 is nothing, if you compare this to drinking rainwater or using drain [surface run-off] water. (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, 7 years in public housing, formerly in Sungai Tapang squatter)

Similarly, access to electricity allowed households to create more comfortable dwellings as they started to invest in home appliances such as electrical fans. Similar to the former rooming tenants, they also reported better efficiency in performing chores with the help of technology. However, it has to be emphasised that some respondents had already owned some appliances when they were still residing in the squatter settlements but the use of the appliances was limited then, due to restricted access to electricity. They could now make full use of them in public housing.

Among the very poor households in this category, several had to choose between water and electricity supply in public housing. They preferred an undisrupted supply of water over electricity, because the need for water was more crucial. This necessity motivated them to pay their water bills promptly every month. The decision to keep water supply over electricity, demonstrates the continuous trade-offs that interviewees need to make in order to maintain certain aspects of a homely home as their housing circumstances change.

As long as there is water supply, it is sufficient. I am not worried about not having electricity, as long as we have water for drinking. (SQ7, female, 40s, 7 years in public housing, spent 14 years residing on garbage landfill)

**Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters**

Because the living conditions in the workers’ quarters were comparable to public housing conditions, the sense of control and autonomy in public housing experienced by this group of interviewees, appeared similar to that expressed about their old place. Hence there was less comparison made by interviewees pertaining to their sense of control and autonomy in both former and current housing. The differences in interviewees’ experiences started to emerge when the neighbourhood was included in the analysis (explored in Section 5.4).
Discussion

The ways in which control and autonomy materialise in public housing show that the sense of home is both material and imaginative. This is to say that although the interviewees are now residing in public housing of a similar housing form and of similar housing status, it appears that their senses of home are different in their own specific ways, concurring with the claim made by Easthope et al. (2015, p. 155). Here, the material aspect of the home is defined by the public housing unit, while the imaginative dimension is defined by how in control people feel in the said unit. As I have shown thus far in this chapter, the different imaginaries of home in public housing are mediated by interviewees’ lived experiences of home in their former housing. For example, interviewees who originated from parental homes relate the sense of control and autonomy to what they saw as having independence in financial management. They also reported independence in use of space inside the dwelling; such freedom allowed them to utilise the space in a way that was meaningful to them, for example, to host gatherings with friends and families. Tenants who used to reside in rooming facilities shared their feelings about the freedom now to carry out household chores given the access to their own kitchen and washrooms, so much so that they equipped their public housing unit with electrical appliances. This behaviour also prevails amongst interviewees who used to share utilities with their landlords and those who used to reside in the squatter settlements, now that they have access to electricity and individual meters. These experiences in public housing show that the imaginative aspects of interviewees’ sense of home occur in two ways, first, the feeling(s) they attach to the dwelling space and second, how they perceive their homes to be. With regard to the former, we have seen how interviewees, who used to have limited control in their former housing, feel much more in control in public housing. In the latter, the narratives demonstrate that interviewees can now create their home in public housing as they had always wished it was or imagined it to be. The home-making practices in the new homes include converting a bedroom into a baking station to generate income or filling their units with electrical appliances to allow for better management of household chores and to create a more comfortable living space. In other words, the ‘imaginative’ aspect of interviewees’ sense of home in public housing are both ‘feeling’ (in control and having autonomy) and ‘doing’ (home-making practices), whereas in the former housing, most interviewees reported the feeling of not being in control, with very little opportunity to create their dwelling space.
The stories presented in this chapter demonstrate how interviewees experience a profound sense of homeliness inside their dwelling in public housing, contrary to the sense of unhomeliness that they experienced in their former housing. The control and autonomy in the parental homes and the private rental accommodation were strongly influenced by the power relations that took place in these housing arrangements. The effects of these power relations seem to diminish with interviewees’ relocation into public housing, giving them better control in the current dwelling space. According to Parsell (2012, p. 160), control in space is crucial in forming one’s ‘understandings of what it means to be at home, because control over a space also means the ability to exercise a degree of autonomy over their lives.’ Clearly in the narratives, most interviewees have control over their space in public housing (including financial and utilities management) and such control significantly characterises their sense of home in public housing.

Not only do tenants have the autonomy to appropriate space inside the dwellings, consistent with Hiscock et al. (2001), but their sense of control and autonomy can materialise in different ways, corresponding to tenants’ past housing experiences. In other words, this thesis expands our current understanding of control and autonomy, from activities that are directed towards the physical dwelling (in Hiscock et al., 2001, the emphasis was on repairs and space use) to other material lived experiences such as the management of household finances and household chores.

5.3.2 Exploring the sense of privacy and comfort

There is a strand of literature that stresses the importance of culture in shaping the ideas and practices of privacy (see Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2010; Ozaki, 2002; Pader, 2002). Privacy, in the context of this thesis, is importantly guided by the Islamic ways of life11 (Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2008) and we have learned in Chapter Four that most interviewees were deprived of privacy in their former housing. Concurring with Harris et al. (1996, p. 288), this thesis has shown that a lack of privacy negatively effects an individual’s self-worth and family functioning. Now that interviewees have access to public housing and most

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11 This is because most interviewees recruited in this study are Muslim. Although there are Christian interviewees, they did not touch on how Christianity views the matter. Further investigations suggest that the prescription of privacy in Christianity is not as clearly stated as it is in Islam.
reside as nuclear family households, this section sets out to examine the ways in which comfort and privacy occur in public housing.

**Amongst former residents of the parental homes**

Tenants who formerly resided in the parental home reported better experiences of privacy in public housing, particularly in their ability to keep their own family’s affairs away from the knowledge of others. The most cited example was the ability to avoid publically exposing family problems that would reflect badly back on the family. In this sense, the notion of privacy is more than just ‘avoiding others’ (Harris et al., 1996; Marshall, 1972) because the emphasis is placed on the effects of the privacy itself – that is to maintain a family’s good image. In this quotation below, ‘eat or do not eat’ was a common expression used to refer to any problems that a household may experience and the phrase does not necessarily refer to one’s ability to afford food.

> It will be better in the public housing – whether we eat or do not eat, people will not know. So, we decide to move out. Luckily we got a place here. (PH1, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in parental home)

Respondents also cited adequate living space in the public housing and that they have gained much needed privacy that was severely limited in the parental home. In the three-bedroom public housing, children’s sleeping areas are separated from their parents’ and segregated by gender. Even if parents allowed their younger children to share their bedroom, it was often out of the parents’ wish to create bonding with their children (Ozaki, 2002) and no longer out of economic necessity as it was in the parental home. Interestingly, despite the larger living space, some households still practiced multiple space use in public housing. For example, there were household members who preferred sleeping in the living room, but only because the space was more airy, and not because of space inadequacy inside the bedroom.

**Amongst former residents of private rental housing**

Among the interviewees who came from private rental housing, positive experiences of privacy and comfort in public housing were most substantial amongst those who formerly resided in rented rooms. Compared to the rented room, the rental flat was certainly more spacious and interviewees regarded it as ‘more proper’ as they could use different spaces
for different activities. The dedicated spaces allowed different household members to negotiate their daily routines whilst minimising conflicts over use of space. More importantly, households were able to regulate privacy according to their cultural norms – similar to the views reported by the interviewees from the parental homes. The ability to do so brought relief to parents with older children because the children were finally allocated their own space. It would have been challenging to continue to manage their growing needs in their former rented room. This is to say, in general tenancy in public housing has enabled households to regulate privacy (and comfort) for the purpose of self or family, as observed in Ozaki (2002, p. 213).

For one single mother, the improved housing situation brought pride and a sense of achievement because she could finally bring her children together under the same roof.

I feel proud and satisfied because, although he [ex-husband] doesn’t care about us, we survived. I have my own income now. We have a good shelter and the children can come to me anytime. (RO7, single mother, aged in 40s, 3 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)

The larger dwelling allowed interviewees to entertain friends or extended families, including for overnight visits. In RO7’s story, her daughters and grandchildren often stayed for at least a week during the school holidays. When she was still in the rented room, overnight visits were not possible due to space inadequacy. In fact, according to RO7, while the three-bedroom flat may not be adequate to host all of them comfortably at one time, nonetheless, the unit has kept her family together. A similar expression was noted in Pader (2002) where she found that in parts of Mexican culture, crowding in a dwelling is of little issue because the emphasis is placed on family bonding.

For interviewees who formerly rented houses in poor condition, the better quality public housing was perceived to be more comfortable and safer. Long gone were the issues of severely leaking roofs and holes in the walls that allowed pests into the house:

I feel happy that my wife and children are staying here. It’s like [a] haven. I cannot offer them a bungalow (laughs). This is our first home made of concrete. (RE1, male, aged in 50s, 2 years in public housing, formerly in rented house in Bintulu)
Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements

For interviewees who used to reside in squatter settlements, a sense of privacy and comfort was lacking in various aspects of their former housing. Families, (both nuclear and extended), were deprived of privacy as they were likely to sleep together in a hall dedicated for a mix of activities. My observations in the squatter settlements suggest limited privacy mechanisms, as mentioned in Newell (1995, p. 97), exist in the housing form to regulate privacy. As presented in Chapter Four, oftentimes in squatter settlements, the washrooms are not fully enclosed; if anything, these spaces are ‘enclosed’ using clothes as a screen. Public housing on the other hand, comes with segregated spaces for different everyday activities, with ‘more permanent’ mechanisms to maintain privacy. The mechanisms, such as doors with locks to separate spaces in the dwelling unit, as well as fully enclosed washrooms and bedrooms, are important as they enable attainment of individual privacy. Female interviewees shared how the properly enclosed washrooms gave them the freedom and adequate personal space to clean themselves without having to worry about the gaze of others. Such space forms ‘a kind of a protection zone’ (Leino-Kilpi et al., 2001, p. 665). In addition, access to modern flush toilets in the flats encouraged convenience and better hygiene, especially according to tenants who formerly resided in Sungai Tapang.

One important issue highlighted in Chapter Four was the severe thermal discomfort experienced in the squatter units. By contrast, the public housing rental flats were typically described as comfortable and ‘not too hot’ because the flats had ceilings. With electricity, interviewees could now switch on the fans to cool themselves anytime. Residing in a more comfortable dwelling had also changed how the children played. If in the past the children had preferred to stay outdoors to escape the uncomfortable heat inside the dwelling, in public housing they now spent more time indoors. This change was also attributed to the access to indoor entertainments such as television programs made possible by electricity supply. On the other hand, children might still have to find entertainment elsewhere, for example when electricity is unavailable as in the case of one extremely poor family when their electricity supply was cut off due to months of arrears. At the time of interview, a mother (SQ8, aged in 40s, previously lived in a garbage landfill for 14 years) expressed worry over her two sons’ (age eight and nine) habit of ‘disappearing’ from their home immediately after school. While SQ8 related the new behaviour to the recent power cut, there was a
possibility that the change in behaviour was also due to the presence of their peers in the estate.

Despite the convenience and comfort of public housing, some respondents shared the occasional stress they experienced due to the added expenses of rental and utility bills. Such concerns were mainly voiced by tenants whose income was limited and irregular, and by those with more dependents. The issues, stemmed from the interviewees’ lack of income, continued to prevail in the new place. They were made worse as this income needed to stretch further due to the financial commitment to elements used to create comfortable living in public housing. In other words, the peace of mind that they used to have (from minimal housing costs in the squatter settlements) was traded for a more comfortable (and more costly) dwelling in public housing.

**Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters**

As noted in the earlier discussions, interviewees who formerly resided in workers’ quarters had favourable lived experiences in their past dwellings. Therefore, they were largely indifferent to the experiences of comfort and privacy in public housing. Only one respondent cited a better sense of privacy and comfort in public housing because the current dwelling had more rooms compared to his former two-bedroom barrack unit. For QR1’s (Malay, male, aged in 50s, formerly resided in the barracks for 21 years) family with three adolescent daughters, the three-bedroom public housing unit eased the crowding that they used to experience in the barrack. The more spacious dwelling in public housing provided the growing children with greater access to personal space, which was important for the purposes of relaxation and emotional release. Access to personal space creates a balance between the need for social interaction and for privacy; a balance important to ‘a normal process of child development’ through the fostering of ‘personal identity, encouraging the growth of competence, promoting a sense of security and trust’ (Newell, 1995, p. 96, and see Leino-Kilpi et. al., 2001, p. 665).

It is important to note that the experiences of comfort and privacy among multigenerational households in public housing are unlike those presented in this section. Larger size multigenerational families in public housing are deprived of comfort and privacy – replicating the situation in the parental home narrated at length in Chapter Four. For this
reason, I decided not to focus on multigenerational households residing in public housing in this study.

**Home-making practices in public housing**

Turning to home-making practices in public housing, most interviewees were actively involved in the process to create a homely home. Much of the practices were similar to those outlined in the literature (Cook et al., 2013; Newton, 2008). Often sighted in their dwellings were objects that signified their sense of self and identity such as photographs of families and extended families, or handicrafts significant to their cultural or regional identity. The most common practices were repainting of the walls, inclusion of furniture into the dwelling unit and installation of grills to increase personal security. Some efforts were more extensive despite SHC’s restrictions on introducing changes to rental units. These efforts included tiling the floors or changing the windows to increase comfort. The activities suggested a profound sense of ownership of the dwelling despite its temporary nature. This finding certainly does not agree with the view that renters are less motivated than homeowners to improve on their housing (Hiscock et al., 2001, p. 58). In this thesis, a sense of autonomy had driven additional efforts by some interviewees to arrange the rental unit as they wished.

A properly maintained flat – demonstrated through repainting the walls and other changes – was strategically perceived as a projection of a household’s positive image. The positive image was believed to translate into a better opportunity for lease renewal in the future. In other contexts repainting of the walls of a rented dwelling is not allowed, such as in the rental sector in Australia (Easthope, 2014, p. 587) as it falls into the category of ‘major changes’. In Sarawak public housing, despite the restrictions on making changes to the dwelling, repainting of the walls was perceived by respondents to cause ‘no harm’. Furthermore, tenants saw themselves doing SHC a favour by improving the interior of the dwelling unit. These two contrasting examples demonstrate the difference between the highly regulated public housing in Australia, and the less regulated public housing in Sarawak. The lack of enforcement in Sarawak has also allowed tenants to reimagine the meaning attached to the activity (repainting the walls) – to showcase their worthiness as responsible tenants. Other approaches are not described in detail here, but are shown in Figure 5.2 to provide a snapshot of the different home-making practices in public housing.
Figure 5.2: Home-making practices in public housing

(Top left) Flat screen televisions are a common sight in public housing. This set was purchased by instalments. Note the bright coloured feature wall against the other white walls in the other pictures. (Top right) This used sofa set was purchased from a housing official and payment was made by instalments. (Bottom left) These chairs were taken from an interviewees’ son’s workplace as the company had ordered in new furniture. (Bottom right) Several houses exhibit rare fish and it is believed that rearing fish can protect the home from intruders.

Discussion

Here, the stories about privacy and comfort largely reflect on the idea that sense of home is material and imaginative. In fact, the ‘imaginative’ aspect of this component of the critical geographies of home occurs in two ways – ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’ (i.e. home-making practices). This is to say that the access to a three-bedroom and two-bathroom public housing (material) allows households to appropriate their dwelling to match how much they perceive their home to be (through home-making practices) and in return, create the sense of comfort and privacy to it (feeling). Privacy regulation has been argued to produce positive effects on people’s attachment to their dwellings (Harris et al., 1996, p. 288), which is evident here.

In the parental home, the importance of privacy is reflected in the significance of keeping one’s family’s affairs away from others’ knowledge. It relates to the notions of ‘shame’ and
‘dignity’ that largely characterise Malay society; with shame, there is little dignity (Goddard, 1997, pp. 187-188). Shame is likely to occur when men or women who have moved in with their in-laws, fail to live up to certain gendered expectations. In other words, there is little room for flaws in the parental home. Conversely, independent living in public housing provides room for people to be at ease and ‘be themselves’ (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Easthope, 2004), away from the surveillance that might affect their self-worth. It is through the control of interactions that privacy is regulated (Harris et al., 1996). In this thesis, we learn that privacy is important not only in the sense of controlling social contacts (Leino-Kilpi et al., 2001, p. 665), but also to regulate ‘shame’ as a result of these controlled social contacts.

Turning to the issue of sleeping areas, this thesis found that most households in public housing are able to materialise privacy regulations through the segregation of children’s sleeping areas, as mandated in Islam. The provision of personal space is important for child development (Newell, 1995). There are views that disagree with providing such space for children (see Pader, 2002, pp. 311-312) but given the respondents’ past housing conditions, provision of personal space for children equally benefits the parents as they too have access to their own privacy. Such provision has been found to have positive effects on good family functioning (Harris et al., 1996; Phibbs & Young, 2005). I also found that the interviewees did not mention if the space layout in public housing helps to regulate privacy according to the Malay traditional ways (such concerns are noted in Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009; Ahmad Hariza & Zaiton, 2010; Ahmad Hariza et al., 2006). It points to the lesser importance of this criterion in the context of the poor in Sarawak (despite some interviewees who resided in Malay traditional houses in the past). This finding shows that in regulating privacy, interviewees place more importance on the amount and types of space at their disposal, than the configurations of that space inside the dwelling.

In this thesis, the idea of comfort covers the very basic, ubiquitous requirements of housing. These include having access to basic utilities and dedicated spaces for sleeping, cooking and washing (including personal hygiene). While there is evidence of home-making practices occurring in the dwellings, these practices are secondary to the idea of comfort derived from the fact that they (the interviewees) are given a three-bedroom, two-bathroom flat in which to dwell. To many, the flat itself is already a major improvement from their former
housing. It is already homely to them in its current state. Over time, interviewees improve their flats through various home-making approaches: some are similar to what is included in the literature (see Cook et al., 2013; Newton, 2008). They incorporate ideas and preferences that project their sense of identity, and ownership and as well as responsibility onto the dwelling unit. The evidence also suggests that despite their status as renters, Sarawak’s public housing tenants’ sense of autonomy within the dwelling is greater than that indicated in the literature (Easthope, 2014, p. 587; Hiscock et al., 2001, p. 58) as demonstrated through their home improvement initiatives.

Tenants’ narratives about their sense of privacy in public housing indicate that they feel a strong sense of homeliness inside their dwellings, contrary to what they had experienced in their former housing. In Chapter Four, we learned that while tenants generally had poor experiences of home inside their dwellings, they had more favourable experiences from residing in their former neighbourhoods. We now move on to examine how tenants’ sense of belonging to the current neighbourhood was shaped by their past housing experiences.

5.4 Neighbourhood as an Extension of Home

This section explores the ways in which the neighbourhood in public housing serves as an extension of home. In particular, this section seeks to answer how a sense of home occurs in the spaces outside the dwelling unit. In order to answer this question, the sense of home in the neighbourhood has to be observed in terms of everyday practices including specific practices that develop a sense of belonging to people and place – as mentioned in Mee (2009, p. 844). The first part of the section provides some common neighbourhood experiences that enhance or threaten attachment to people or place in public housing. The second part includes specific stories reflecting senses of home in the neighbourhood which are specifically influenced by the interviewees’ housing histories.

Before we proceed to the accounts of homeliness or unhomeliness in the neighbourhood, it is important to note that the term ‘neighbour’ in this section refers to people residing adjacent to each other, usually within the same floor or within the same staircase block. The term ‘place’ refers to the immediate space outside the boundaries of the dwelling unit (including the hallway and the foyer) as well as the common areas inside the estates or in some cases, within the suburbs where the estates are located.
5.4.1 Sense of belonging to the community

I found that a significant proportion of interviewees reported having good relationships with their neighbours. This positive bonding was the result of their living arrangements, in which most interviewees had been living next to their current neighbours for (at least) the past five years at the time of interview. Previous studies have shown the strong association between length of residence and belonging to the neighbourhood (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2005, 2011). The effect of homogeneity was profoundly in play given that tenants were distributed into different blocks according to race and religion (except Demak Laut, see Section 3.3.2). This attribute has been argued to be a strong determinant of social cohesion (Lewicka, 2011; Vervoort, 2012). Their bonding was generally enhanced through daily interactions as they saw each other in the hallway, visited each other and exchanged home-cooked food or assistance between themselves. The good interactions in public housing however, were confined between neighbours of similar floors or staircases. Table 5.1 includes selected quotations to illustrate how different forms of assistance were exchanged, as trust and dependency were created between interviewees and their neighbours.

Table 5.1: How neighbours rendered help to one another

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of support</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Trusting neighbours with properties</td>
<td>When we go back to the village, I pass [over] the house keys and ask my neighbour to look after the house. [Likewise] when they go back to the village, they will usually pass their TV and gas cylinder to us. (SQ4, Bidayuh, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in Sungai Tapang squatter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Neighbour helps with caring of children</td>
<td>That day, I was very sick. I could not get up. My neighbour across helped me to take care of my grandchildren. She fed them and bathed them… (RO6, Bidayuh, female, aged in 50s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The sense of familiarity with the neighbours was also noted in PH1’s expression as she responded to a question about the idea of leaving public housing after the maximum tenure:

[Sighs] Aduh... All of us here... We have been neighbours and we don’t feel like separating from each other. Do you get what I mean? Because we are so familiar with each other, it’s been six years... They also said, ‘Where to find a place? If we need to find a new place, let’s search in the same area.’ [Laughs] We are so close, just like siblings. (PH1, Malay, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in parental home)

Most respondents however, refrained from asking for financial assistance from their neighbours, despite the claim of the sibling-like relationship. Borrowing money, often regarded as a very sensitive issue, was one thing that interviewees chose not to discuss with their neighbours, especially when they too were in vulnerable financial situations. In other words, the expressions ‘like family’ or ‘like siblings’ were limited to daily interactions but with certain limitations in terms of favours that one could seek from close neighbours. These limitations however, were offset by the benefits resulting from the good sense of neighbourliness as shown in Table 5.1.

Having said this, we need to acknowledge that how the neighbourhood serves as an extension of home is not static. In other words, not every experience is favourable as narrated above. The following discussion focuses on the ways in which the sense of home in the neighbourhood was shaped by interviewees’ past home experiences. For each housing arrangement, I will only focus on one pertinent effect resulting from the interplay between the past and the present experiences of home in the neighbourhood.

Amongst former residents of the parental homes

Despite the evidence showing a good sense of neighbourliness towards their immediate neighbours, there were cases where interviewees who used to reside in parental homes (particularly in Malay traditional villages) reported feeling less belonging to the community in public housing. The lack of belonging was due to the relatively new community in public housing which was unlike the familiar faces of the traditional villages. In the traditional villages, everyone seemed to know everyone and on top of that, social bonding was
strengthened by kinship. The lack of familiarity with people in public housing led to a decline in the informal social control which was a strong characteristic of the village community. The lack of informal social control resulted in a less extensive scale of social support in the estates. In the past, children could roam around the village whilst under the observation of other adults but this was no longer the case in public housing. Their play areas were now confined to certain spaces where their parents could monitor them directly.

The effect of a less cohesive community was made worse by the habits of some neighbours who preferred to keep their front doors shut most of the time. This sight was very uncommon in traditional villages. I call it the ‘closed doors syndrome’. Contrary to the ‘closed doors syndrome’ is the ‘open doors approach’ that appears to have positive effects on social interactions and security in the neighbourhood. Because of the ‘closed doors syndrome’, some interviewees hardly knew their neighbours. The neighbours were perceived to be very individualistic for not ‘opening’ themselves up to others. One respondent who resided on a top floor opined that the little interaction between neighbours (caused by the ‘closed door syndrome’) potentially limited mutual benefit.

[Referring to the dirty staircase and hallway beneath her floor] They do not bother about the cleanliness on their own floors. Maybe they are expecting us to clean their hallway as well. We, on the fourth floor, are willing to help them clean up, but are they willing to do that? (PH3, Malay, female, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing, formerly in parental home)

PH3’s remarks reflect on the importance of cohesion to bring people together to achieve a common goal. She argued that without social cohesion, it was difficult to keep the common areas clean and this was visible from the discarded rubbish in the hallways and the staircase leading up to their floor. On the contrary, the hallway on her floor was clean because her same-floor neighbours worked together to keep the space tidy. The occupants of her floor often left their doors open to keep themselves accessible to each other. Her comments concurred with my observation, suggesting that neighbours who are friendly with each other tend to maintain the external spaces better than the neighbours who are not.
Amongst former residents of private rental housing

Interviewees who used to reside in private rental properties had somewhat different experiences from those narrated by interviewees who came from parental homes. In the past, they reported being less friendly with their neighbours due to the higher turnover of tenants which prevented the creation of a stable community in this sector. The lack of cohesion was also linked to their cultural differences and this was very true for interviewees who used to reside in the shop houses. Conversely in public housing, they resided with neighbours who shared a similar culture and the sense of belonging to the community was more apparent there. The contrasting situations rang true for a single mother who used to reside in a non-Malay dominated area. With her Malay neighbours in public housing, she finally felt being part of a small community (albeit confined to the same staircase) and often exchanged home-cooked food with others there.

In particular, I would like to highlight how cultural similarities affect interviewees’ daily interactions in public housing. Neighbours who shared a similar ethnic background or religion often exchanged favours easily as they understood their cultures better. For example, it was easier for Muslim tenants to organise meals together due to their halal food requirements. One Bidayuh-Christian interviewee (RO6, Bidayuh, female, 3 years in public housing) enjoyed the company of her non-Muslim friends as they could organise a meal on a regular basis. According to her, there was no reservation about consuming each other’s cooking as they shared similar dietary requirements. In other words, the sense of familiarity with the cultural practices enhanced people’s peace of mind as they interacted with others. Although the discussion above applies to most interviewees regardless of their housing histories, this experience was notable amongst interviewees who used to reside in rooming facilities because they had little opportunity to do this (i.e. sharing a meal) in the past, due to both the limited space in their former housing and the mixed racial composition in private rental areas.

The segregation policy in public housing has therefore benefited this group of interviewees to a large extent. Such distribution has encouraged occupants to organise cultural or religious events in public housing. Access to common areas in public housing was another reason these celebrations were made possible. Here, I would like to highlight the ngiling tikai celebration to demonstrate the ways in which interviewees who used to reside in
private rental properties experienced a sense of belonging to the community in public housing. The *ngiling tikai* celebration is celebrated annually to mark the closing of the rice harvest festival. Traditionally, the celebrations are elaborate and often involve the entire longhouse community. In public housing, *ngiling tikai* was confined to a same-staircase community (16 families altogether), because it was easier to meet as a small group of people who were familiar with each other, than bring 64 households from the entire block together, who may not know each other despite having a similar culture. Even though the celebration was much reduced in scale, it reminded RO2 of the bonding they used to have in the Iban longhouse:

> Our life here is like how it was in the longhouse, only that we live in a flat. But we organise ourselves, the activities, like we did in the longhouse. We appoint our staircase leader, and we have our own committee. If anything happens, like if anyone is in trouble, or in the event of death, or sickness or moving house, the community will come and help. I feel that I am living in a longhouse. (RO2, Iban, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly resided in a rented room)

This quote also reflects on the similarity between the social structure in public housing and that of the Iban longhouse. In both situations, this appointed structure enabled the mobilisation of resources in the community. The organisation was less visible in private rental because first, they were racially mixed and second, the high turnover of occupants in private rental discouraged the formation of a structured community. It was in public housing that, for this group, efforts to introduce a familiar tradition started to materialise. This effort brought people of similar cultures together, although on many occasions the bonding, as mentioned earlier, was limited to neighbours residing on their respective floor or staircase.

**Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements**

Interviewees from the squatter settlements had to modify their ways, from living with their own race in the squatter settlements to living side by side with other races in public housing. As mentioned before, the squatter settlements in Sarawak are racially identified. To recap, Siol Kandis is home to the Iban, Sungai Tapang’s occupants are primarily Bidayuh and Taman Won is home to the Malays. Only one family in this study resided on their own
(in a garbage landfill in Matang for 14 years) rather than in a community. It has been mentioned in an earlier chapter that tenants in Dahlia are distributed into different blocks according to race, while the housing block in Demak Laut are mixed in composition. I suspect the different formulas produce different ways of belonging in the respective estates, but I did not investigate in detail how tenants’ sense of belonging differs between the two estates.

In general, the interviewees in the Dahlia estate appreciated the ways in which they were distributed in the facility and that they had little issue maintaining good contact with their immediate neighbours who shared their culture. They were also involved in cultural celebrations organised in their respective staircase, similar to the accounts provided by the interviewees who used to reside in private rental properties. Having said this, certain modifications in terms of lifestyle were required now that they resided in multi-racial public housing estates. Similarly, residents in Demak Laut had to change their ways, maybe more profoundly, because they were placed in multi-racial blocks, unlike their peers in Dahlia.

Iban interviewees in both estates reported feeling restricted in carrying out their usual daily practices. For example, in the past, the interviewees who used to reside in Siol Kandis could call out loudly to each other and there was no issue organising weekend gatherings that included alcohol and pork consumption in the open. These practices were now restricted in public housing as they had to show their respect to other tenants, especially the Muslims. According to several non-Muslim interviewees, whenever they felt like roasting pork, they would do it in isolated locations, away from the sight or the smell of the Muslim tenants (see Figure 5.3). The move was necessary to avoid any conflicts that may occur in the heterogeneous community. The actions, although out of respect, could also be seen as denying one’s right to carry out their own cultural practices, in their own home areas. But in the event where there was little privacy to perform some practices that could appear insensitive to others, the adjustments were necessary to maintain harmony on the estates. This also meant tenants sacrificed a certain amount of freedom to do things their own way but most interviewees agreed that such modifications were trivial compared to the housing benefits that they gained from the lease in public housing.
**Figure 5.3: Roasting pork in isolation**

Inside this securely fenced garden, there is a shed equipped with a self-help barbecue pit where non-Muslim interviewees often roast pork in seclusion, away from the view of their Muslim neighbours.

**Amongst former residents of the workers’ quarters**

Amongst the interviewees who formerly resided in workers’ quarters, the sense of belonging to the community in public housing appeared to be mixed. Specifically, three out of four interviewees gave positive accounts of living side by side in public housing with neighbours of a similar culture; their experiences similar to the stories presented earlier.

The most favourable effects of residing in a homogenous community (same floor, same staircase and same block) were narrated by one interviewee who formerly resided in a multi-racial barracks. His sense of belonging to his current neighbours in public housing was driven by the similar culture that they shared. In the past, when he was the only Malay in the barracks, he had no choice but to tolerate the social practices that were against his own values. The cultural differences resulted in his family’s isolation from their neighbours in the barrack. With their current neighbours in public housing, they had no reservations frequenting each other’s places or having meals together. In fact, these activities occurred frequently in the new setting. In other words, they felt more belonging to the community in public housing. As this interviewee observes:

> Here [in Dahlia Estate], everyone is Malay [Muslim] except for two blocks. Block A and Block B are home to other races [who are non-Muslim]. Living amongst the Malay is good. Whatever they cook, we feel comfortable...  (QR1, Malay, male, aged in 50s, 3 years in public housing, formerly in government quarters)
In contrast to the experiences cited by QR1, one family felt exceptionally unhappy residing in Sri Wangi where all the tenants were Muslims. In their case, this family felt less belonging to public housing due to the numerous social problems occurring on the estate. They were often troubled by the sound of fights and arguments coming from their neighbouring units. While there were positive experiences from residing with the community in Sri Wangi, the negative experiences, according to them, were overwhelming. They were also troubled by the behaviour that occurred on the estate, contrary to the strictly regulated housing complex where they used to formerly reside. They strongly projected a sense of detachment from both their current community and place, compared to other tenants who came from different housing histories, primarily because this family had the most favourable experiences in all aspects in their former housing. This particular story reaffirms the significance of housing histories in shaping the ways in which certain expectations of home are formed, be it inside or outside the dwelling unit.

The discussion that follows positions the findings presented in this section, in relation to other studies in the academic literature. Before that, I discuss how people’s sense of belonging to the community as presented in this section, illustrates the ways in which the home is porous and multi-scalar. It is important to note that much of the evidence presented in this section demonstrate the porosity of the home, hence, the multi-scalar experiences of home are only mentioned here briefly. The idea of a multi-scalar home is elaborated at length in Section 5.4.2.

**Discussion**

Based on the stories presented in this section, the porosity of the home can be observed in three ways. First, it can be noted when people’s sense of belonging to the community (or the lack of it) occurred differently in their past housing experiences. This is to say, people’s sense of belonging to the community in the new place (public housing) was not formed in a vacuum. Rather, the interactions in public housing were perceived in relation to interviewees’ interactions with the local community of their former dwellings. For example, interviewees who came from traditional villages or squatter settlements specifically commented on the absence of informal social control in public housing, because the presence of this aspect shaped their sense of belonging (or homeliness) to the community of their past housing areas. In other words, they carried with them the experiences with
the community in the past as they formed a sense of belonging to the current community. Second, the idea of a porous home is evidenced by the presence of social support inside or outside the estates which shaped interviewees’ sense of home in public housing. It is found that when neighbours made themselves accessible to each other, as exemplified in the ‘open door approach’, the favourable lived experiences of home in public housing became more pronounced. Some interviewees, for example, handed over their house keys and important belongings such as televisions and gas cylinders, to their trusted neighbours whenever they had to go away for some period of time. Such support allowed interviewees to feel safe about leaving their homes (knowing that someone was looking after it) and, because of these external supports, they were able to engage in meaningful activities away from home. Third, the effects of being in a homogenous (when observed as an individual block – but not the case of Demak Laut) or heterogeneous (when observed as an estate overall – except Sri Wangi) community have produced certain behaviours at home. It is common to find that more people felt ‘at home’ as a result of being with neighbours of a similar race, so much so that they had meals together and frequented each other’s places. On the other hand, being in a heterogeneous community had caused some interviewees, especially non-Muslims coming from squatter settlements, to modify, oftentimes to restrict, some of their everyday practices (i.e. roasting pork in isolation rather than doing it in the open, in the hallway). Being in a community of certain characteristics had caused interviewees to view and treat their home areas differently. This shows that the way people treat their home area is shaped by external influences, i.e. their interactions with the people living around them. Across these aspects, multi-scalar experiences of home can be demonstrated by how people relate closely with their most immediate neighbours, oftentimes within the same floor or the same staircase. In this sense, the multi-scalar experiences of home here are limited to the scale of the neighbourhood, similar to the home scale presented in the work of Dyck (1990), on neighbourhood-based mothering practices in Canada. The idea of a porous and multi-scalar home in this thesis is unlike the extensive concept of a multi-scalar and open home argued by Blunt and Dowling (2006). In their seminal work, Blunt and Dowling argue that the porosity of the home occurs both ways (outside to inside and vice versa) involving the diverse scales of the home: ‘from the body and the household to the city, nation and globe’ (p. 27). Despite the difference in
scale, this study shows how the activities that occur within the limited scale of the neighbourhood can largely influence people’s sense of home in public housing.

The narratives presented in this section demonstrate that homogeneity (see Lewicka, 2011; Vervoort, 2012) and length of tenure can bring positive effects to people’s sense of belonging to the neighbourhood (see Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Lee & Yip, 2006). Homogeneity can be important for fostering belonging and it is especially so in Sarawak when the interviewees share a similar cultural background. A good neighbourly relationship is also likely to be attributable to tenants’ similar housing timeline in the facility. Most interviewees entered public housing around the same time as their neighbours, forming what Kleinhans et al. (2007) described as a ‘joint new start’ and accordingly, ‘having people with similar characteristics living nearby makes positive social cohesion easier and more likely’ (p. 1088). This is to say that public housing occupants are likely to find more similarities between each other due to their housing circumstances. Furthermore, given their low income situation, neighbours become the tenants’ most reliable source of social support (see Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Livingston et al., 2010).

These ties however, are limited to the most immediate neighbours located on the same floors or sharing the same staircase. Here, the idea of a multi-scalar home is observed, given the amount of sharing and caring that occurs between neighbours has stretched people’s sense of home beyond the four walls, although limited to the scale of the neighbourhood. The scale of this relationship affects interviewees in different ways, depending on their housing histories. For example, tenants who used to reside in private rental properties appreciate the bonding because in the past, the occupants in their former accommodation were constantly changing. Conversely, the interviewees who have spent most of their time living in traditional villages or in squatter settlements commented that the limited scale of social bonding undermines the prevalence of informal social control leading to less personal safety on the public housing estates. If it occurs at all, informal social control might take place most in places where bonding is strong. It is also shown in this thesis that for a certain group of interviewees, the scale of friendship ties has significantly reduced, say, from an entire Malay kampong to a number of Malay families belonging to the same floor or to the same staircase.
On several occasions, the reduced interaction was due to the prevalence of ‘closed doors syndrome’ happening on the estates. The ‘closed doors syndrome’ appears to be less appealing to some interviewees who came from the Malay traditional villages. In the village, community intimacy is seen to be more important than individual privacy (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009, p. 199). In the modern public housing setting, the closed doors are potentially linked to the functions of a home as a site of privacy, domesticity and refuge after a day’s work. These functions allow people to ‘shut’ themselves away from the rest of the world, including their neighbours. This finding resonates with Ahmad Hariza and Zaiton (2010, p. 263) who argue that mass housing design in Malaysia pays little attention to privacy. This is reflected in layout of the flats that face each other across a hallway. Within this layout, a household’s privacy in the dwelling is severely compromised when the door is left open. The closed doors suit the needs of families or individuals who wish to experience the quiet enjoyment of their home; however, this behaviour undermines an aspect of community intimacy that is important to the traditional ways of life (see Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009 on community bonding in Malay traditional villages). On the other hand, the ‘open door approach’ that took place in public housing successfully accounts for community intimacy which carries with it certain benefits. In other words, despite the present argument that mass housing design undermines privacy and people actively seek ways to ‘restore’ privacy, there are people who wish to remain ‘open’ to their neighbours. In this study, I did not explore how neighbours employing the ‘open doors approach’ maintain their privacy, but this question is worth exploring in future studies.

As we can see in this section, people’s sense of belonging to their community in public housing is rather mixed. Contrary to the favourable lived experiences of home inside the dwelling, the sense of homeliness in the neighbourhood was in fact lacking in some cases, as observed in the experiences of interviewees who used to live in traditional villages and in squatter settlements. Both categories of respondents had to forgo the elements of informal social control that they used to benefit from in their former neighbourhood, for a more comfortable dwelling in public housing. More importantly, the evidence shows that interviewees’ experiences with community in their former housing have set high expectations of community, which they have brought with them to their current life in public housing. But tenants have been quick to learn that some of these expectations have
to be sacrificed if they wish to continue staying in public housing. This brings us to the notion of an ‘unruly’ homogenous community, narrated by one interviewee who formerly resided in a highly regulated workers’ quarters. In this case, the effects of homogeneity were undermined by truculent social conduct (see Bwalya & Seethal, 2014, p. 49) that occurred in the public housing community that this interviewee perceived to be caused by a ‘lack of discipline’.

The idea of an unruly neighbourhood is in fact, produced by the feeling of place detachment in public housing, as we shall see soon. This brings us to the next section as the chapter unpacks the ways in which interviewees from different housing histories feel more belonging or less belonging to the physical neighbourhood.

5.4.2 Sense of belonging to place

This section provides accounts of the ways in which interviewees from different housing histories feel ‘at home’ in the physical neighbourhood of public housing. The analysis captures the meanings given to the surrounding areas in the public housing estates, as well as the locations where the estates are located. We now proceed to the specific ways in which the sense of belonging to place was experienced by interviewees, in relation to their housing histories.

Amongst former residents of the parental homes

More than half of the interviewees who came from parental homes in traditional villages were partially relocated. Partial relocation means that moving into public housing did not entail changes in the children’s schools or the interviewees’ workplaces (see Clark, 2012, pp. 69-70). Partial relocation also means contacts with the people at the old place were able to be maintained. The adjacent locations of public housing and the parental homes enabled interviewees to continue receiving social support from their parents or immediate relatives. Several interviewees have their immediate relatives also residing in the same public housing estates (in different housing units) and they are able to exchange social support amongst themselves on a regular basis.

The types of social support rendered by family members (who live nearby) inside or outside the estates usually take different forms, depending on the household’s needs. Families with school going children normally received support in child care. Certain strategies were
included to ensure that the giver could conveniently provide the support. For example, one of the strategies included enrolling children at schools closer to the parental homes, so that the grandparents would commute only a short distance to fetch the children after school (see Table 5.2). The proximity of the home places also allowed interviewees to easily provide assistance to their parents in the kampong whenever their parents needed help. Another example of family support is also shown in Table 5.2, where an interviewee opted to send his family back to his in-laws’ whenever he was working a night shift. This decision was in response to the perceived unsafe environment in public housing, as presented earlier in this section. More often than not, accessibility to this kind of support enabled different parties to attend to their daily routines without having to worry about their loved ones’ well-being.

Table 5.2: How social supports materialise between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of public housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Care of children after school</td>
<td>After school, my father picks up the children and brings them back to the kampong. There, they take their baths and my mother feeds them. My husband picks them up from my parents’ place after work and brings them home. Because of this arrangement, I purposely enrolled them in a school closer to my parents’. (PH3, Malay, female, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Keeping family company</td>
<td>I think about my wife and son’s safety. When I work night shift, she prefers to go to her parents’ house at Kampong Gita [about 6.6 km from Sri Wangi estate]. I will fetch them the next day after work. (RE2, male, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing, formerly in parental homes, rented house)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a small number of interviewees who were so used to the strategic location of their kampongs, the location of public housing was less convenient. According to PH6 (female, aged in 70s, formerly resided in Kampong Ajibah Abol for 60 years), she could no longer frequent places independently as she used to in the past. Now, instead of walking to the polyclinic for her regular check-ups, she had to rely on her son or other children to take her there. Her frustration was a reflection of her lack of control in the new location (public housing), which was unlike the familiar village environment she had grown up in.
Amongst former residents of private rental housing

Among the interviewees who used to reside in the rooming facilities of this sector, the sense of belonging to place in the public housing units was due to the larger space they now had to carry out social reproduction activities. This was especially true for larger households or families with young children. To them, the hallway and the open spaces in public housing meant more play areas for the children, whereas in the past they were confined to their rented rooms. These spaces were also utilised for relaxation purposes, to entertain guests, or to carry out household chores (see Figure 5.4).

**Figure 5.4: Different uses of the hallway and open spaces**

(Top left and top right) The hallway and the foyer are commonly used to hang washing out to dry. (Bottom left) A barbecue pit and a seating area to entertain guests. (Bottom right) The hallway also serves as a play area for young children.

Gardening is found on a larger scale in Dahlia and Demak Laut estates where there are larger concentrations of Iban or Dayak occupants. Although gardening was important to Iban and Bidayuh interviewees from any housing histories, the opportunity to garden was highly valued by the interviewees who used to reside in rooming facilities. In the past there was little opportunity for them to grow plants as they had no access to land. Similar to the argument I presented in Chapter Four, the ability to garden created belonging to place as it
allowed tenants to engage in an activity that was significant to their culture (Iban or Bidayuh) and through gardening, they were able to put fresh food on the table at a minimal cost. Their stories are presented as follows, and these experiences also apply to other Iban and Bidayuh tenants who came from the squatter settlements.

In public housing, tenants have the opportunity to appropriate open spaces for their gardening needs, however this was not without its initial changes. Given the ‘unwritten’ rule that prohibits gardening within the boundaries of the public housing estates, it was through negotiations with the housing managers that tenants were able to start their own gardening plots. Briefly, through the negotiations, tenants initially gained approval to garden outside the estates and over time, they slowly brought the practice into the boundaries of the estates (see Figure 5.5).

Because I wanted to [garden], I asked Sarawak Housing Corporation [SHC] [if we could do gardening]. He said we can do it outside [the estate]. I didn’t mind. I spoke to my friends [that we are allowed to garden in the area outside]. We went together to clear the area. We planted corn, sweet leaves, cassava, some carrots and other leafy vegetables... (RO6, Bidayuh, female, aged in 50s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)

Many interviewees reported incidents of vandalism and produce stolen from their gardens. This unruly conduct, which they had rarely come across in the past, brought anger and frustration as these actions showed disrespect towards their hard work. Despite their frustrations, interviewees perceived the benefits of gardening outweighed the losses, especially when they could reduce their household’s food expenses. Over time many had adjusted to the situation by minimising their losses by only planting more resilient, commonly used and high yield plants such as cassava, sweet leaves, lemongrass, chillies, turmeric and pandan leaves. Residents avoided planting vegetables that required more care since they perceived it was no use putting a lot of effort into something that could end up stolen. As RO2 reflects:
We used to plant pumpkin, melon and long beans [and other leafy vegetables] but not anymore... Because of the thieves, I’d rather plant those [common] types of vegetables. If they want to steal them, they can go ahead, I wouldn’t mind! (RO2, Iban, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)

The downside of the ‘adaptation’ to public housing living was that interviewees had little freedom to continue their gardening practices as they once had in the villages or in the squatter settlements. They also ended up purchasing other types of vegetables from the market which could be more expensive than the costs of planting the vegetables themselves. The situation demonstrated a reduction of control for interviewees over what they could do or gain from the estate (outside estate) gardens. Despite these reported dissatisfactions, tenants still regard it worthwhile to live in public housing. They stated that
they felt content as long as they had access to control and privacy in their own flats, because the issues occurring outside the dwelling were beyond their control.

For respondents who used to rent houses in isolated locations, the sense of belonging to place in public housing occurred when they had good access to retail and social services. In the past, they had to travel farther just to gain access to these services.

Yes, big difference. Everything is close by. The school is nearby. The area for shopping is close and it is easy to get to the clinic. (RES, female, aged in 30s, 8 years in public housing, formerly in rented house in Bintawa)

For some interviewees, relocation into public housing was an added bonus when their children gained convenient access to better education facilities. This was especially true for one mother as her new home in Sri Wangi estate was located near a special school for children with learning disabilities and her son was then able to attend the school. The adjacency to the school was very significant to the family as there are only a few such schools in Kuching. Here, the sense of belonging to the area was enhanced by the quality of the services that one could attain and not just accessibility per se.

Another aspect that shaped several interviewees’ positive outlook towards the estates is how public housing was perceived to be safer than their old rented place – particularly when past experiences were terrifying. Two respondents narrated their negative experiences, which had strengthened their view that public housing was indeed a better place to be ‘at home’. The first story involved a family who rented in a notorious village where regular police operations took place due to the severity of crime in the kampong. The second story involved a victim of a snatch thief whose sense of personal security had strongly deteriorated since the incident. Contrary to the majority of interviewees who perceived that the quality of the dwelling was more important than the quality of the neighbourhood, they opined differently by asserting that both dimensions were equally important. They valued the more peaceful environment in public housing, unlike their former neighbourhoods. Both stood by this view despite their awareness of certain problems occurring on the estates.
For several respondents who used to reside in shop houses located near the city, the location of public housing turned out to be less advantageous. One of these experiences was narrated by a home based seamstress whose income was reduced because she was no longer easily accessible for her clients:

Most of my clients are working. Because the traffic is bad after office hours, they cannot come to pick up their clothes on weekdays. They’ll come on weekends instead. Sometimes they say, ‘Oh, I can’t come today, I’ll pick up end of this month after I receive my pay…’ [In the past, RO3 operated from her rented room in a commercial area. It was convenient for her clients to collect their orders and her income was regular then]. (RO3, female, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing, formerly in private rented room in Satok)

Not only was RO3’s home-based business affected, her family too had to negotiate a substantial change in their daily routines resulting from the relocation into public housing. This is the account of the changes from my fieldnotes.

In Satok, it was very convenient for RO3’s four children to go to school. The schools were within walking distance. The eldest son walked to school by himself and the younger ones were accompanied by their mother. Ever since they moved into public housing, all the children had to travel to school by bus. While the eldest son could go on the bus independently, RO3 had to accompany the other three children to travel to and from school. Although the children started and finished their lessons at different times, RO3 brought all of them out at the same time and spent most of her time in a local library while waiting for her children to start or finish their respective lessons. She could not afford to commute between home and school repeatedly to accommodate the different schedules. On a typical day, she left home at 11.30 a.m. and only returned home around 6.00 p.m. After that, she had to prepare dinner. Because of these new routines, there was little time for RO3 to concentrate on her sewing. It was unlike the days they were still in Satok, when she did not have to commit so much time tending to the children’s schooling needs and she could easily buy cooked food from nearby stalls. The convenience in Satok
allowed her to focus on her sewing and she was able to complete her orders in a
timely fashion. In public housing, she was always behind her schedule.

Despite these challenges, RO3 felt that it was worthwhile to continue living in public
housing. There were times that she wished they were back in Satok, yet she rationalised
that the hardships were temporary and that the children would become more independent
as they grew older. This is to say that RO3 placed higher importance on her family’s comfort
inside the dwelling than the convenience from being in a good location.

Amongst former residents of the squatter settlements
Interviewees who used to reside in the squatter settlements however, regarded the
surrounding environment and the locations of public housing as favourable compared to
their former housing. Most regarded the surrounding environment of their current dwelling
as more hygienic and better regulated, attributed to the drainage and sewage system, and
regular garbage disposal services. The biggest change was in fact the massive reduction of
mosquitoes and diseases that were present in the less hygienic squatter settlements.
Interviewees reported feeling happier and were satisfied that their children were sheltered
in better housing conditions by comparison with their old place. Furthermore, the public
housing estates are located so much closer to retail and social services. Tenants could rely
on regular and affordable bus services to go into the city. Easy access to public transport had
provided them with a significant amount of independence and control, as they now could
choose how or when to get to services. Residing in a well-developed area also meant more
options to choose from when they went shopping as SQ5 explained:

It is convenient for me to buy things [in Matang where Dahlia is located]. When we
were in Siol Kandis, it was too far for us to travel to town to buy clothes. Here, it is
easy. We have KK store, E-mart and other shops. There is more to choose from. I
like living here! (SQ5, female, aged in 30s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in Siol
Kandis squatter settlement)

Unfortunately, not every household could appreciate the ‘better’ location. For example, one
extremely poor family found themselves located farther away from their children’s school
and now they had to rely on bus services to get there. In the past, they walked to school and
although the journey was free, it was dangerous. Due to their state of poverty, a safer trip
on a bus to school was perceived a burden due to the cost. Because of this reason, the children missed school regularly. In fact, SQ7 felt trapped living in public housing (similar to the findings reported in Van Eijk, 2012, p. 3021) primarily because each ‘convenience’ in public housing (including the bus rides to school) required payment that continued to stretch their budgets:

My children go to school by bus. For the return trip, it is RM6.00, only for the fare. Not for their expenses at school. The teacher sent a letter recently, asking why my children often missed school. Actually, we don’t have the money for bus fare every day. [In the past, the children walked to school]. (SQ7, female, aged in 40s, 7 years in public housing, formerly resided on garbage landfill)

Chapter Four covered stories about some interviewees who frequently foraged in the secondary forest-like surroundings of their squatter settlements. In fact, they had access to good quality wild vegetation in the former place but it was no longer the case in public housing. Having little opportunity to forage did not affect the interviewees if foraging was solely for their own consumption, because they could still grow their own food. Several interviewees had participated in some other income generating activities, in fact, since relocating into public housing. In short, the benefits gained through foraging in the past have now been replaced with other activities that can benefit the households equally, if not better.

But the restricted opportunity to forage in the new place appeared to have substantially impacted one family who used to rely on these resources to make ends meet. In the past, SQ7 (female, aged in 40s, 7 years in public housing, formerly resided on garbage landfill) could easily harvest wild vegetables in her old place of residence for an income. Since moving into public housing, she had to explore other places to forage. She reported a significant reduction of income resulting from the change of place. She has had to explore other ways to earn an income. The sense of belonging to place now then, was a dilemma as she was cut off from her reliable source of income, yet she did not see her family going back to the landfill because they were satisfied with (yet sometimes intimidated by) the regulated environment in public housing.
Amongst the four respondents who used to reside in workers’ quarters, one family’s story is useful to showcase how former experiences of place have an effect on people’s sense of belonging to their current neighbourhood. According to QR1 (Malay, male, aged in 50s, 3 years in public housing, formerly in government quarters for 21 years), he was extremely satisfied with the location of the Dahlia estate because Dahlia was much closer his parents’ home located nearby Kuching city than his previous home in the barracks and they had good access to commercial and social services. The barracks, were located in an isolated forest reserve and it took close to an hour to get to his parents’ place. In Dahlia, the journey took less than ten minutes. Thus the move to Dahlia had allowed him to see his ageing parents more frequently and conveniently. An added benefit of the move was that his children were now enrolled in a more highly performing school with a more competitive environment, perceived as better to motivate children to do well at school. Coming back to urban Kuching was like coming home for QR1 because he grew up in this region. As such, the tenancy in public housing brought him back to an area he was so familiar with and strengthened his sense of belonging to place. According to QR1, the relocation was worth it even though it meant he had to travel farther (and spend more on petrol), to commute between his workplace (located closer to the demolished barracks) and Dahlia. The trade-off was in fact, worth it because of the various benefits gained from this residential mobility.

Home as a workplace
In this subsection, I discuss how ‘home as workplace’ in public housing has strengthened some interviewees’ sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Out of the 43 respondents, eight were actively engaged in home-based businesses or paid employment in public housing. While there is no corresponding evidence between such endeavours and housing histories, most business operators are stay-at-home mothers or elderly people. The small businesses were established inside the dwelling units or in the foyers. Two interviewees were employed as cleaners on the estates, where they had flexible working hours. The establishment of these home-based enterprises was made possible with a certain amount of control and autonomy over space use inside or outside the dwellings. Such autonomy was evidenced, for example, through the actions of turning a bedroom into a sewing room or
turning a foyer into a makeshift eatery to sell hot food at night (see Figure 5.6). The establishment of these small enterprises demonstrates interviewees’ sense of confidence and familiarity with the area and the community in public housing.

Interviewees who worked from home reported less interrupted routines despite income generating activities and found that they could still perform their roles as domestic carers at home. The conflation of work and home has been argued to potentially bring about financial resourcefulness among women who are tied to traditional gendered roles in the household (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001, p. 141). In this thesis, working from home gave rise to a new sense of homeliness for women in public housing. Despite being confined to the domestic space, they were able to contribute to the household financially as SQ2 describes:

I use the earning to help my husband. In case we are short, I can use the money to purchase food or maybe things like fridge, electric fan, and other things that are needed for the house. (SQ2, female, aged in 30s, 7 years in public housing, formerly in Sungai Tapang squatter settlement)

In the past, some interviewees were not able to start work ventures for various reasons. For example, SQ2 gave the absence of electricity and an unattractive location as the reasons for not starting her stall when she was still residing in Sungai Tapang squatter settlement. Several other interviewees, on the other hand, had been running such ventures before they moved into public housing and it was just a matter of relocating their businesses to the new place. As narrated earlier, there were cases where the relocated businesses did not turn out as well as they did in the past.

These stories demonstrate a combination of human ingenuity and the confidence people have for the area where they live, materialised through these enterprises or through the jobs they took up, to improve on their social and financial circumstances.
Figure 5.6: Home-based businesses inside the dwellings and around the neighbourhood

(Top left) One bedroom has been transformed into a sewing room by a home-based seamstress. (Top right) A part of the dining area is used to set up a home-based groceries store. Note the open door but a locked iron grille to secure the premises. (Bottom left) SQ2’s stall has a simple set up, where she uses a blender to create ice cold drinks, something she could not do in the squatter settlements in the past due to the absence of electricity. (Bottom right) This hot food stall only operates at night.

Threats to the sense of place

This subsection provides the accounts of two concerns that generally made interviewees feel less comfortable living in public housing. In other words, their sense of attachment to place was threatened by these concerns. These commonly shared issues are of crime in the neighbourhood and issues of caring for children in the public housing flats.

Crime in the neighbourhood. The stigma and challenges associated with large public housing estates have long been established (Hayward, 1996; Palmer et al., 2004; Silver, 2011). Sarawak public housing is no exception. According to interviewees, house break-ins were regular occurrences in the estates. Several respondents have had their jewellery, cash, electrical appliances or even LPG gas cylinders stolen by what they suspected to be inside jobs. The break-ins have resulted in the installations of grilles (or other crime prevention efforts) in almost every occupied unit in this case study. Some efforts demonstrate tenants’ ingenuity to keep their home safe (see Figure 5.7). Apart from house break-ins, motorcycle
theft often took place on the estates. To prevent motorcycle theft, the owners secured their motorcycles to a pole or pipes with chains or additional locks as can be seen in Figure 5.8. Car owners on the other hand, would strategically place their cars in a location where they could observe the cars from their dwellings. For some respondents, it meant waking up several times at night just to have a look and reassure themselves that their cars were still there.

Figure 5.7: Measures to enhance bodily safety

(Left) Tenants installed iron grilles at their front doors to enhance safety in their dwellings. Note the unit on the right where this tenant has created a double front door to increase safety. (Right) Iron grilles are installed between the hallway and the air well leading to the kitchen.

Figure 5.8: Preventing motorcycle theft

Motorcycles are chained to the pipes or poles in the foyer to prevent theft.

The incidence of house break-ins were related to the lack of community bonding, particularly on the floors or staircases where tenants preferred having their front doors
closed most of the time. When their doors were closed, tenants were unaware of the events that occurred outside their own dwellings. While the closed doors could be an immediate reaction aimed at increasing tenants’ own personal safety or protecting their belongings in the neighbourhood, overall it created a vulnerable environment that potentially facilitated criminal behaviour. This view is backed up by the literature that argues that criminals often target properties that appear ‘less guarded by their neighbours’ (Brown et al., 2004, p. 361). On the contrary, several respondents from different housing histories strongly agree that the ‘open door approach’ deterred criminal behaviour. They opined that neighbours should watch out for each other and keeping their doors open was a good way to do so. For example, while spending time sitting and chatting in the hallway, the neighbours also observed the people who went up and down the staircase (see Figure 5.9) and they could distinguish between residents and strangers. This behaviour is akin to Jacobs’ (1961, p. 89) description of ‘casual surveillance’ on the street. Tenants’ watchful eyes appear to be a strong deterrent for intruders. One neighbour in an upstairs flat (Malay, single mother, aged in 30s, 7 years in public housing) reaffirmed this, by relating her sense of bodily safety to her observant neighbours downstairs.

**Figure 5.9: Chatting and observing**

Neighbours who often spend time together in the open or leave their doors open can prevent the occurrences of crime in their own floor or staircase, unlike neighbours who employ the ‘closed door syndrome’.

**Issue of caring for children in flatted dwellings.** In the four-storey public housing blocks, parents were faced with another challenge in terms of child care and monitoring. These challenges have been observed in previous studies, which have highlighted and critiqued claims that apartment living is less suitable for households with children (Easthope & Tice, 2011; Fincher, 2004). Interviewees’ concerns about children living in public housing related to the housing forms of their pasts, where children from the traditional villages, squatter settlements, rental houses and some in the workers’ quarters, were residing in single storey
dwelling units. Children’s play areas in the shop houses were confined within the spaces of the rented rooms. In public housing, young children’s play areas were limited to inside the dwelling or in the hallway (although the hallways were perceived unsafe for children due to the presence of staircases or balconies where they were exposed to the risk of falling). Concerned adults often employed certain safety mechanisms to reduce the perceived threats (see Figure 5.10). Older children were allowed to play in the foyer or open spaces provided they could be observed by their parents directly from the units, usually through the balcony or the kitchen windows (see also Figure 5.10). Permission however, was often given half-heartedly, primarily because parents feared for their children’s safety, given the occurrence of crime in the neighbourhood and also due to the regular reporting of missing children in Malaysia. In most cases, children were given strict rules. Conditions often cited were that they must only play within certain areas visible to the parents and that they must respond to their parents’ call-outs to ease the parental worry:

I let them play downstairs but I warn them not to go too far away. They can only play downstairs [in the foyer] and they can’t play too long. I will call out to them frequently and they must answer. As long as I could hear their voices, I know they are okay and I am okay. (PH8, female, aged in 30s, 3 years in public housing, formerly in parental home)

At this point, we can conclude that the flatted dwellings were less parent- and child-friendly than other types of housing. The housing form prevented parents from directly monitoring their children when they played downstairs and the children’s play areas were restricted to areas where parents could only observe them from afar (unless in both scenarios the parents accompanied them). This evidence strongly supports the view that certain forms of housing are more suitable for families with dependent children (see the critique in Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Mee, 2010), by stressing that the design of apartment living fails to consider the needs of families with dependent children in this Sarawak context.
Figure 5.10: Children monitoring at play

(Top left) Adults installed this self-help gate to prevent young children from falling off the stairs when they played. (Top right) These potted plants on the fourth floor are placed close to the side of the balcony to prevent children from getting too close to it. (Bottom left) The foyer is a common ‘playground’ for children but direct monitoring is unlikely here. (Bottom right) This is the open space where parents can observe their children from their respective dwelling.

Despite these challenges (and the other challenges highlighted earlier), most interviewees felt that it was still worthwhile residing in public housing, mainly because the rental was affordable and that their current dwelling was much better than their former housing. Furthermore, most interviewees perceived they could not afford to reside elsewhere. Despite the general perception that public housing was relatively better especially in terms of housing form and affordability, some interviewees expressed the feeling of being ‘trapped’ in the less privileged neighbourhood, as identified in past studies (see Hiscock et al., 2001; Van Eijk, 2012). That said, many thought that feeling ‘at home’ inside the dwelling was of paramount importance. They also added that the unfavourable events that happened beyond the four walls of their flats were dismissible as long as they had access to affordable, adequate housing (i.e. self-contained and relatively spacious) which they could call their ‘own home’.
Discussion

This subsection discusses the aforementioned findings using the idea that the home is open and multi-scalar. As mentioned in Section 5.4.1, the discussion on the ways in which the home is multi-scalar is more profound here, primarily because this section documents people’s experiences and sense of home at different spatial scales. The porosity of the home is also discussed in relation to the multi-scalar experiences of home and vice versa (where appropriate). This is followed by the positioning of the findings within the current scholarly work on home.

The idea of a multi-scalar home is demonstrated in two important ways. First, it is shown through the ways in which interviewees appropriate the outdoor spaces of the public housing estates in ways that are meaningful to them. This is demonstrated in the utilisation of the hallway, the foyer, and nearby green spaces for the purpose of gardening. This thesis found that these spaces were used to carry out domestic and familiar routines, making the external spaces an extension of the home. Second, the multi-scalar home was shown in the ways in which residents benefitted from, or were challenged by, the location of the estates. This study also shows that people who felt ‘at home’ because of the external spaces (mentioned above) did not necessarily feel ‘at home’ when the location of the estates were taken into account. Residents who benefitted from the location (e.g. better access to commercial and social services) may feel ‘at home’ there, but residents who were challenged by the location (e.g. farther school, no opportunity to forage), did not regard the location as ‘homely’. In fact, the different experiences resulting from being in a certain location affect people’s sense of home in public housing. We have seen how one mother reported feeling stressed from the demanding routines of sending her children to and from school, after they moved to public housing. Here, the porosity of the home is exemplified when people’s sense of home in public housing is highly influenced by the routines that they have to negotiate outside of the estates.

Other than the aforementioned example, the porosity of the home in public housing is also shown when interviewees reported feeling worried about the safety of their home and belongings due to the incidence of crime on the public housing estates. The feeling of insecurity in return, has led interviewees to employ certain measures to protect their family, home and belongings. Other specific examples that demonstrate the porosity of the home
are the challenges in child care and monitoring in flatted dwelling, the ability and the challenges to perform gardening, the inability to forage and the ability to run informal businesses in public housing. Take for example, gardening, the ability to garden in the open spaces in the estates (outside) had enabled some families to afford nutritious food (inside), but the incident of stolen vegetables had created frustrations amongst residents who garden, hence, they resorted to only planting common types of vegetables (outside). In this sense, the porosity of the home occurs both ways, from the outside to the inside and vice versa. Similar to what has been mentioned in Section 5.4.1, the porosity of the home is reflected in how interviewees relate their sense of belonging to place in certain ways, specific to their housing histories. This phenomenon shows that people’s sense of belonging to place does not occur in isolation. Rather, interviewees were influenced by their experiences with place in the past.

As I have established in the previous section, the ways in which a porous and multi-scalar home are demonstrated in this thesis are mostly limited to the scale of the local neighbourhood, including the public housing estates and their respective suburbs. Despite the limited spatial scale, this evidence argues that events occurring ‘closer to home’ are useful to demonstrate the porosity and the multi-scalar nature of home, particularly in the Sarawak context.

As presented above, interviewees reported positive experiences with place for different reasons. Many interviewees showed high levels of satisfaction with the current neighbourhood as it is perceived to be better than their former neighbourhood. Citing Higgit and Memken (2001), the public housing neighbourhood provided an ‘adequate level of stimulation’ to the occupants. Such stimulations included access to better commercial and social services, cleaner neighbourhoods, accessibility to gardening activities as well as income generating opportunities in public housing. The home-based income generating activities for example, create stimulation and increase people’s (especially women’s) confidence and sense of purpose (Downey & Moen, 1987, p. 328). This perception in return increases individuals’ attachment to the neighbourhood. The ‘stimulations’ however, are relative to interviewees’ experiences in their former place. Therefore, it was not surprising when some interviewees found that the new neighbourhood was ‘less stimulating’; this
view is exemplified by the story of the home-based seamstress who admitted that her business had slowed down after her family had moved to public housing.

I have identified two events that generally threaten interviewees’ sense of place in public housing. One of the events is crime in the neighbourhood, which interviewees perceived to be the reason for the ‘closed doors syndrome’. The literature argues that high incidence of crime undermines social cohesion (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Kleinhans et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2010; Van Eijk, 2012). The ‘closed doors syndrome’ demonstrates this connection. Some households in public housing choose to keep their doors shut to increase their own safety in response to crime. But by closing their doors, they became unaware of the surroundings outside and thus, became detached from the community. In such a situation, crime could easily occur (Brown et al., 2004). This finding shows that the link between crime and social cohesion is not a simple and direct relationship (i.e. crime leads to the lack of social cohesion). Rather, both occur as an iterative process that continues to undermine social cohesion and foster crime in the neighbourhood. The second concern was highlighted in Easthope and Tice (2011), in which they posit that the design of higher density housing prohibits effective childcare and monitoring. These limitations have necessitated certain restrictions on the ways that children were allowed to appropriate space in the neighbourhood (Mee, 2010, p. 194). We have seen in previous examples how children’s play was restricted in the name of safety. Academic literature in this area has called for formal mechanisms to lead to safer and better neighbourhoods for children. One suggestion included in Easthope and Tice (2011) is to provide seating areas for parents to interact with other parents while watching the children at play. Alongside this idea, this thesis describes the informal means developed by parents to monitor their children even from afar, thus demonstrating the ongoing importance of human ingenuity to promote safety amongst children who reside in less privileged residential areas.

Lewicka (2011) notes the lack of studies that compare people’s sense of place across different place scales. My work contributes to this gap as it shows how interviewees tend to place more importance on the experiences of home inside the dwelling than outside it. In other words, they felt more ‘belonging’ to their dwellings than to the neighbourhood (see Lewicka, 2010), potentially because they had more control in this space, given the clear property boundaries (Anton & Lawrence, 2014, p. 453). Therefore, in the instances when
interviewees were unhappy, for example, with the cleanliness of the hallway or with their neighbours, they retreated indoors. Similarly, in the experiences of the tenants who garden, they have accepted that they have little control over the garden. Hence, the people I interviewed decided to focus on minimising their loss more than on protecting their plots (although there are cases where tenants claimed ‘ownership’ by erecting fences around the gardens). It is safe to say that the general consensus is this: the housing unit is more important than the neighbourhood. Conversely though, there is a small group of respondents who stressed the importance of having access to good quality housing and good neighbourhoods. In the past, they resided in ‘problematic’ neighbourhoods. Their opinions demonstrate the importance of housing histories in defining what people expect from their area of residence. Due to unfavourable experiences in their former home places, they have developed stronger opinions on the good aspects of the neighbourhood that other tenants may ignore in their narratives. Past experiences have also taught them to look past certain events that other interviewees saw as a threat to their sense of ontological security. For example, interviewees who used to live in ‘bad’ neighbourhoods commented that public housing is safe when the other interviewees regarded it otherwise.

Consistent with the central argument of this thesis, the experiences that interviewees had in the neighbourhood are directed by their place experiences in former housing. Families continue making trade-offs even after they have moved into public housing, mostly due to unfavourable experiences. These trade-offs include changes in their routines and the need to tolerate the feeling of lack of personal security, in exchange for a more comfortable home in public housing. Yet, many interviewees regarded the ‘disturbances’ occurring outside the domestic sphere as tolerable. This view is held primarily because interviewees place paramount importance on homeliness within the domestic space (where they have absolute control) rather than stressing homeliness in the neighbourhood, where they have little control.

But, against the practices of housing governance, can people still have absolute control in their dwellings? The section that follows sets out to discuss how enforcement and maintenance affect the meanings of home that people attached to their housing.
5.5 Housing Governance: Enforcement and Maintenance

Housing governance, denoted by enforcement and maintenance, is a crucial element of any public housing across the globe (Chin, 2004; Hayward, 1996; Yau, 2011). In this thesis, housing governance is an issue dear to many respondents as their senses of home were significantly affected by the ways in which governance was carried out in the Sarawak public housing. This story is an important contribution of this thesis as the effects of housing governance on the sense of home are still under-represented in the literature.

5.5.1 How enforcement practices affect the sense of home?

Even though the exit policy (which implies that tenants must leave public housing after six years) is not directly implemented, the practice of enforcement has been required to ensure that tenants comply with their lease conditions. Tenants are forced to make good on their rental payments. In other words, power relations between the new landlord and tenant are exhibited through acts of enforcement. Many interviewees in the past have encountered enforcement practices directly or indirectly, primarily in the squatter settlements where many stories surrounding the act of enforcement were unpleasant (refer to Chapter Four).

The most common encounter with governance reported in public housing was tenants being served with reminder notices. Or worse, several had experienced their unit being locked up as the final warning for defaulting on their rental payments. It is stated in public housing contracts that tenants who are 14 days late in remitting their monthly rental will be served with a reminder notice and may face eviction if the arrears are up to three months. Interviewees’ narratives suggest that enforcement practices did not often appear as contracted. In fact, some of them were being served with reminder notices only after months of defaulting on their payments. By then, tenants were already racking up a substantial amount of arrears. There were also cases where rental units were locked up after more than six months of arrears. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to look at the reminder notices, probably because the interviewees did not feel comfortable sharing that material with an outsider. Housing managers on the other hand, claimed that they sent out the notices periodically, and it was those final reminders that often brought nonpayers to respond to them. About one-third of the respondents had been served with at least one reminder notice in the past year. While some tenants reported prompt reminders from SHC,
some interviewees claimed delayed action from the agency, which resulted in alarming effects for them.

There was one time when I was given a notice for RM1000+ of rental arrears [equivalent to at least seven months of rental defaults]. So SHC gave us 14 days [to settle it]. Where to get the money, RM1000+ in 14 days? If people are penniless, how can they pay? If only SHC sent the notice straightaway [three months of arrears is RM450], it won’t be so much of a burden on us. We could afford to look for a lesser amount. (RE8, female, aged in 30s, 7 years in public housing, formerly in a rented house)

Under these circumstances, interviewees had to gather substantial funds to settle the arrears and several of them went to some lengths to do so. The necessity to keep a roof over their heads drove the affected tenants to take the matter up to the housing managers so that they could be given ample time to pay off the debt. More often than not, the housing managers agreed to do so. This process is also highlighted in the literature about evictions, notably in the US, however with strict enforcements (Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Truman, 2003). Some interviewees were allowed to pay in instalments on top of the regular monthly payments. One interviewee (Malay, single mother, aged in 50s, formerly in rented room, 6 years in public housing) settled the arrears in a lump sum by borrowing from her brother. Not everyone though, could renegotiate the terms – to pay by instalments – due to their payment history. For example, one interviewee decided to borrow from a money lender (popularly known as a ‘loan shark’ due to the very high interest rate) when she had no-one else to turn to:

There was one time when business was bad and I was totally short of cash. They wanted to lock my unit! I really begged them, I really tried! My debt was RM3000+ [equivalent to at least 20 months of non-payment]. We really needed a place to stay and the government didn’t want to help. So, I went to the money lender. (RO4, female, aged in 50s, 4 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)

During these trying moments, public housing was no longer homely for her. RO4 admitted that borrowing from the loan shark was a bad move. Not only had she built the debt up to nearly two-times the original amount, but she also had someone appearing at her door
every day to collect the payment. She was constantly worried she would not have enough to pay the debt collector. When that happened, she appealed and promised to pay double the following day. It was only after the debt was paid off that the rental unit again felt homely to her.

Being served with the reminder notices or having their unit locked up in the past were shameful experiences for the interviewees, especially when housing officials decided to put up a large notice in front of their doors. The action made their problem visible to other tenants. The sight of a chain and a padlock on the front door of a locked up unit sent out a message that the said household was in financial stress. In both scenarios, tenants’ sense of privacy was threatened by the enforcement practices. As narrated by one interviewee, having their unit locked up about a year ago created a feeling of helplessness when her household (consisting of her son and his two young children) was not allowed to enter the unit until certain conditions were met regarding the settlement of the arrears:

This house was locked up several years ago. We were asked to stay outside the house. We had to wait for my son to return and talk to SHC. Only after that they unlocked the door and we could go inside. I didn’t know what he did. Whether he had to settle half of the amount, I wasn’t sure... (PH7’s mother, single mother, aged in 50s, 6 years in public housing)  Note: This family was evicted from public housing in 2014 several months after the interview took place.

While the defaulters had first-hand experience with enforcement, other tenants who might have witnessed the procedures had indirectly learned about the consequences of failing to abide by their rental contracts and what could be done to counter the situation. In short, the direct or indirect encounters with enforcement practices had taught tenants about negotiating their future in public housing. The information was shared between community members and provided an informal ‘guide’ on the next course of action should they find themselves in similar situations.

Given the lack of affordable housing options elsewhere, tenants generally placed very high importance on the continuity of their lease in public housing. This priority was reflected in their strategies to keep a good payment record by setting aside the money for their rent before anything else. Interviewees believed that tenants with a good payment record had a
better chance of having their lease extended than those who did not project this quality of reliability. Nonetheless, I found that tenants who had cleared their arrears also stood a good chance to have their lease renewed. In relation to lease renewal, there are tenants who were granted another two-year lease beyond the six-year maximum lease. This development, to some extent, erased interviewees’ worry about their future in public housing. It was presumed that since public housing was governed by one agency (SHC), the practice of tenancy renewal beyond the six-year limit would apply to all, as long as they remained ‘good tenants’ and abided by the rental conditions. In Sarawak, the criteria of a ‘good tenant’ include being a consistent payer, and having no record of anti-social behaviours, echoing the criteria highlighted in the literature (Flint, 2004; Yau, 2011).

Some interviewees perceived that SHC’s style of governance was ‘more humane’ in their enforcement practices. This comment generally came from the interviewees who used to reside in private rental housing, who had had experienced stern actions from landlords or banks (several had had their rental places repossessed). The narrative of a ‘more humane’ housing manager is shown in this quotation when severely defaulting tenants could still find a way to continue staying in public housing:

The tenants on the floor above mine have their reminder notices pasted on the wall. They owe RM2000, RM3000 in arrears. Maybe because SHC does not act like a bank, they didn’t simply kick people out from the house. SHC may be sympathetic because the [defaulting] family is still there. (RE2, male, aged in 30s, 1 year in public housing, formerly in parental home)

Again, this comparison strengthens the notion that how people experience sense of home in public housing – in relation to the act of enforcement – is shaped by their housing histories.

The perception of SHC’s ‘leniency’ was strengthened by the fact that the housing policy was not strictly enforced, and had provided room for tenants to discuss their future in public housing. This situation has allowed people to renegotiate their position in public housing, eventually also renegotiating their sense of home there, given the policy was not set in stone. Tenants’ active responses towards the enforcement practices reflected their vital need for affordable housing. It also shows that when it came to protecting a meaningful
place like home, the poor were very active and able to navigate the barriers within the housing management practices.

5.5.2 Lack of maintenance and the effects on the sense of home in public housing

As the housing manager, Sarawak Housing Corporation (SHC) was liable to carry out maintenance in public housing. Tenants were required to send in requests for repairs and for most interviewees this was an attractive feature of living in public housing. They were given the impression that the state was taking care of the different aspects of their housing needs. On my visits to the estates, I was exposed to the state of disrepair of the blocks and the dwelling units; a situation which reinforced the popular discourse about disinvestment in public housing in the US, Canada and Australia (Arthurson, 2012; Briggs et al., 2010; Hayward, 1996; Silver, 2011). The lack of maintenance occurring inside and outside the dwelling units affected tenants’ sense of comfort and safety in public housing. I found that tenants placed more stress on the maintenance inside the dwelling unit, primarily because the dwelling unit was their space of domesticity and privacy.

Almost all interviewees were appalled by the state of disrepair of their dwellings. They commented that SHC responded more frequently when it came to enforcement but showed contrasting attitude with regard to matters concerning maintenance. The agency could take months before they actually responded to requests for repairs. Interviewees claimed that the repairs, when performed, often produced unsatisfactory results and sometimes the repairs were not good enough to rectify the defects:

We diligently paid for the rental yet they hardly responded when we requested for repair. We kept on reporting, and we continued paying the rent. We pay and pay and pay. But they never repair. When they finally came, the work and the materials were low quality. (RE11, Malay, male, aged in 30s, 12 years in public housing, formerly in rented house in Bintawa)

The different forms of disrepair threatened interviewees’ sense of comfort at home and the defects potentially brought danger to the households. The most common defect was deteriorating window frames. Interviewees who resided on the top floor faced more problems as they were likely to deal with leakages from the roof and ceilings, on top of rotten window frames. Table 5.3 outlines two major concerns shared by the interviewees
and how the sense of homeliness was compromised because of these concerns (see also Figure 5.11).

**Table 5.3: Potential dangers associated to disrepair**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dangers</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Loose openings</td>
<td>Once, a glass louvre from the toilet window fell down. Luckily there wasn’t anyone down there when it happened. We tied the louvres to the frame to stop them from falling. (RE9, Malay, female, aged in 20s, 6 years in public housing, formerly in private rental)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Potential structural defect</td>
<td>[Refers to ceiling] Leaking problem. The beam inside could be rotten [because of the prolonged exposure to rainwater]. I am afraid it [ceiling] could collapse. We have told them so many times but the repairmen said this repair requires more work. They have to take off everything [roof and ceiling] if they really want to fix it. (RO1, Iban, male, aged in 30s, 5 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to RO1, it was not worth staying in the current unit as he faced more problems than other tenants, yet they paid the same amount of rent. His appeal to relocate into a different unit was still pending at the time of the interview. It seems that not only were the housing managers incompetent in carrying out maintenance around the estates, they were also unresponsive towards the tenants’ desires to improve on their living conditions in the facility.

Another problem registered by almost every interviewee was the way that the windows were placed in the apartment blocks. On rainy days, rainwater sprayed into the dwelling unit through the rotten window frames and missing glass, drenching the furniture and floor in the living room. The situation was frustrating as households needed to clean up every time after rain. Many households decided to take control of the situation by covering any gaps or openings on the windows using clothes or plastic bags. The efforts exemplified human ingenuity to maintain their homely sphere within their means and circumstances.
While the defects in the windows and ceilings could be tolerated, it was the blockage in water fixings that often caused disturbances of interviewees’ daily routines. Interviewees believed the problem was linked to poor infrastructure design, as the wastewater pipes were incapable of discharging waste efficiently with the growing number of households in the estates for example, the kitchen sinks were often blocked. Finally tenants took ‘radical’ measures to solve the problem once and for all.

The problem [blocked pipes] has been ongoing for a long time, it was miserable for us. We can’t wash the dishes, we can’t take bath. It was very bad. Since it was so difficult for us, we decided to break the pipe downstairs. That is how the wastewater is discharged now. (RO4, female, aged in 50s, 4 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)
This ‘solution’ was also a response to the management’s incompetence to address the problem adequately.

We have complained so many times but there was no action. There is no cooperation from the management. Although we are only tenants, we are residents here. We pay our rent. They should consider our comfort. If that is how they [management] deal with problems, then there is no use for us to complain anymore. (RO4, female, aged in 50s, 4 years in public housing, formerly in rented room)

The problem is a combination of poor design considerations, incompetent management, tenants’ behaviours and how tenants perceive the inside-outside spaces. The last two were evidenced by the sight of food residue in the discharged wastewater, confirming the stories of some interviewees that some households tend to discard their food waste directly into the kitchen pipe. Over time, this practice has caused pipe blockages and created problems for other tenants whose units are linked to the same pipe. Several interviewees described how their kitchen sinks often overflowed, resulting in disruptions to their daily routines. The
repeated calls to SHC to improve on the situation gathered little response; insufficient funding was cited as the main reason for delaying the repairs. The unfavourable circumstances called for tenants’ initiatives to deal with the situation themselves. More commonly around Dahlia and Sri Wangi estates, the lowest end of the waste pipes were purposely broken to allow smoother flow of the kitchen waste water, even though breaking the pipes meant the waste water would now overflow onto the foyer (see Figure 5.12). The action, nevertheless, provided a more permanent solution to the issue of pipe blockage than the tenants had experienced thus far.

In the example above, the paramount importance placed on comfort ‘inside’ the dwelling resulted in the unhygienic state of the foyer. But because the foyer was ‘outside’, this part of the building was seen as unrelated to the home place indoors. The filth on the outside was perceived to have little to do with the comfort inside the dwelling unit, unless tenants could smell it. This was in fact, a problem faced by some tenants residing on the first floor as they had to tolerate the sight and the smell of the filth on a daily basis. While the smell would come and go, it was unquestionable that the tenants were denied quiet enjoyment of their home to some extent, because of the bad odour. The importance of the ‘inside’ was also demonstrated through the actions of some interviewees who were committed to carry out urgent repairs inside their dwellings, especially when the defects were known to disrupt their routines significantly. In their words, it was not worth waiting for SHC to perform the repairs at the expense of their own comfort at home. Such repairs were often minor and affordable, ranging from leaking taps to blocked toilets or blocked pipes. Having said this, some interviewees were adamant that SHC should conduct the repairs even at the expense of the comfort in their own homes.

**Discussion**

The narratives provided in this section illustrate how the practice of housing governance in public housing affects interviewees’ sense of home on the estates. The exploration of the lived experiences of home with respect to housing governance is framed by the idea that home is porous and multi-scalar, and that power relations affect how people experience

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12 In fact, in the past, pipe blockages were cleared but the problem reoccurred as households continued with their old habit of pouring unfiltered food residue down the kitchen pipe.
home in public housing. In fact, these components of the home are linked to each other. The practices of enforcement (driven by the view that tenants have to be reliable payers) and poor maintenance in public housing (due to disinvestment in this housing sector) had resulted in certain home-making practices which importantly showed how tenants perceived the ‘inside and outside’ spaces. First, the requirement to remit rental payments on time had caused some households to restrict their expenses on other necessities, such as on food items. The situation in return, had encouraged them to bring in food using other means, such as through foraging and gardening activities. Second, the culture of poor maintenance in public housing had forced tenants to pay more attention to their own dwelling unit (i.e. no pipe blockages) than creating a clean neighbourhood (i.e. filth in the foyer). In these examples, the porosity and the multi-scalar experiences of home are demonstrated in how certain expectations set in housing policy (including disinvestment in public housing), produce certain (sometimes radical) home-making practices unique to the context of this case study – more of these are covered in the paragraphs that follow.

The state of disrepair in public housing has been highlighted in past studies (Hayward, 1996; Jacobs et al., 2010; Silver, 2011) and there is no exception in Sarawak. The deteriorating estates are the outcome of the state’s disinvestment in public housing and other affordable housing programs in Malaysia. The lack of maintenance, especially inside the dwelling units, has threatened tenants’ sense of homeliness in public housing. In response to the situation, tenants are actively ‘fixing’ the defects that are known to profoundly affect their daily routines. The defects are ‘rectified’ at the expense of the spaces outside the dwelling unit. For example, one of the urgent defects are blocked kitchen pipes and the response to the problem is always breaking the pipes on the ground floor to release the clog allowing the kitchen waste water to leak onto the foyer. The outcome of the ‘solution’ is a visibly dirty and foul-smelling foyer. This response illustrates the importance that tenants place on the comfort inside their dwelling rather than the spaces beyond it. Furthermore, the situation suggests that in the absence of sound maintenance, households are forced to demonstrate a certain amount of autonomy – in fact, more than just having autonomy in space use in public housing as identified in past studies (see Easthope, 2014; Hiscock et al., 2001) – in order to maintain homeliness inside their dwelling. This evidence contradicts the claims made in previous studies that renters are less motivated to make repairs in their dwellings.
(Hiscock et al., 2001, p. 58) because they have no stake in the property (i.e. they are not homeowners). In the Sarawak public housing, the motivation for tenants’ home improvement practices is to maintain a homely home regardless of their status in the facility.

The literature on public housing governance often highlights eviction as an outcome of enforcement practices (Hunter & Nixon, 2001; Truman, 2003). This study provides rich information by exploring the effects of enforcement practices on tenants’ sense of home in Sarawak public housing. Although the exit policy is not enforced, the power relations between the housing managers and the tenants are in play when defaulting tenants are served with reminder notices or have their units locked up. The practices of enforcement significantly affect interviewees’ sense of homeliness in the facility, not only from the fear of losing the rental flat, but also from shame when their vulnerable situations are made public through the acts of the enforcers. This thesis importantly showcases human survival strategies in response to enforcement practices. Some of the desperate measures that several interviewees took in the past, including obtaining loans from a money-lender, demonstrate the paramount importance that they placed on the need to access affordable public housing. Most interviewees realised that there is no other affordable housing option in the market and that going through difficulties is worth it as long they can continue staying there. Similarly, the effects of housing histories have shaped the ways that interviewees perceive the enforcement practice itself. While most interviewees commented that enforcement practices are inhumane, several interviewees, particularly who had witnessed housing repossession by commercial banks in the past, opined otherwise and felt that the enforcement practices thus far are rather lenient and more ‘humane’ compared to the banks.

The housing managers’ contrasting approaches towards enforcement and maintenance demonstrate the uneven share of responsibilities within the contractualist approach (Deacon, 2004, p. 915). In the Sarawak public housing, tenants are pressed to honour their contracts through the practices of enforcement and the failure to do so entails shame and intimidating repercussions. The housing managers on the other hand, repeatedly failed to provide adequate housing maintenance to the tenants, yet these failures were not accounted for. While the uneven expectations caused interviewees to feel unhappy with the
housing managers, they perceived that it is still worth staying in public housing given its affordability and more importantly because, many of them have experienced severely inadequate housing in the past. Therefore, the challenges that they faced from residing in public housing are dismissible compared to the advantages that they gained from keeping their rental unit.

5.6 Conclusion
In this chapter, I find that the insights of the critical geographies of home, complemented by life-course perspectives, offer a more comprehensive framework to examine the ways in which a sense of home materialises in Sarawak public housing. We have learned that for many interviewees, the sense of homeliness in public housing is largely shaped by the materialities of housing and feelings that derive from appropriating the dwelling unit and its surrounding areas. In this chapter, the power relations in the household that importantly influenced interviewees’ sense of home across their different housing histories, have in fact, diluted. However, the effects of power relations still prevail in public housing, resulting from the housing manager-tenant relationships that have evidently pushed some tenants into disadvantaged positions. The porosity of the home and the multi-scalar experiences of home are demonstrated by the influence of housing histories on people’s sense of home. It is also shown by the interactions between people and people, as well as people and place, in hallways, in the surrounding neighbourhood and in the suburbs where the estates are located.

In essence, this chapter provide answers to this question: now that tenants from different housing histories and complex backgrounds are placed in public housing, how does the sense of home occur in this new setting? This thesis argues that tenants’ housing histories have shaped the ways in which they experience home in public housing. In particular, the sense of homeliness in public housing is framed using the ideas that home is a site of control and autonomy, home is a site of comfort and privacy and that home is a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Across the narratives presented in this chapter, I found that the experiences of home in public housing are specific and to a certain extent, unique, across the different housing histories. For example, within the idea that home is a site of control and autonomy, tenants who formerly resided in parental homes now have more autonomy in managing their household finances. They also experience better time management in
organising their daily routines. Tenants who used to reside in rented rooms now have better control in managing their daily routines through having access to their own kitchen and bathroom. Former squatter settlers appreciate access to clean water and electricity. Tenants who used to reside in workers’ quarters however, exhibit indifference due to their better home histories. The markedly different experiences of home are in fact, an important contribution of this thesis. It has been argued that home histories are important to understand the meanings attached to home (Lewin, 2001; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). This thesis further unpacks the relationship by expanding on the literature to make sense of how low-income families in Sarawak in less secure housing, experience home. Not only does this thesis offer rich descriptions of how housing histories shape senses of home, the findings also demonstrate the significance of housing histories over housing security in influencing the sense of homeliness in this part of the world.

Similar to the sense of home inside the dwelling unit, the sense of home in the neighbourhood is profoundly shaped by interviewees’ housing histories. The multi-scalar experiences of home show that tenants feel more attached to their dwellings than to the neighbourhood. In other words, tenants pay a lot of attention to their sense of homeliness inside their dwelling, so much so that the unfavourable events that occur around the estates that potentially threaten their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood are in fact, relatively unimportant to them. Having said this, the amount of control that households have inside the dwelling is potentially threatened by the practices of governance that seem to undermine the sense of home physically (from the lack of maintenance) and emotionally (from the act of enforcement).

Another important finding of this chapter is that low-income households continue to make trade-offs even after they have moved into public housing. In the past, tenants with different housing histories adjusted differently in order to stay housed. They placed more importance on keeping a roof over their head than being comfortable in their former housing. In public housing, the trade-offs are made in order to continue residing in an affordable three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment – where the physical state of the housing is definitely an upgrade from their former dwelling. In other words, tenants appreciate the sense of homeliness that they experience inside their rental unit, which is an
improvement from the expectation that they had before (that housing is shelter and protection). They now consider a dwelling as their haven.

Therefore, despite tenants’ diverse housing histories, they have similar levels of tolerance toward negotiating the challenges that they face in public housing. Their housing histories have taught them that there are worse housing situations out there. Given their state of income and the limited option of affordable housing on the market, they are likely to go back to their former housing situations if they leave public housing. Under these circumstances, many would want to stay on and decide to overlook the various unfavourable situations occurring on the estates. For many, public housing is now home to them, and until they can find another three-bedroom unit in a better location with a similar kind of affordability or have the opportunity to buy into the housing market, many are just content to stay put in public housing and many will do what it takes to stay securely housed on the estates.

So, what have we learned about the significant contribution of the conceptual framework (primarily informed by critical geographies of home and the life-course perspective) employed in this thesis? Indeed, perspectives of the critical geographies of home have pointed to the different ways that a sense of home is produced in the Sarawak public housing. This insight challenges the limited view that sense of home is determined by tenure longevity. More importantly, the use of this framework has shown that the sense of home for low income families in Sarawak often means contradictory experiences taking place inside or outside of the dwelling unit. The life-course perspective on the other hand, advances the importance of housing histories in creating a more critical understanding of home by low-income families in this region. In particular, this thesis argues that sense of home is always relative – reproduced in relation to the past – hence, echoing the non-static feature of the home as identified in Blunt and Dowling (2006). Equally important, the framework demonstrates the significance of trade-offs in low-income families’ housing and home-making decisions as they continue to make the temporary Sarawak public housing their home. Overall, this framework has been useful to tease out critical knowledge about the home, and to highlight the importance of housing histories in the analysis of home, particularly from the Sarawak perspective, which is scarce in the literature.
Chapter 6
Conclusion: Key Findings and the Way Forward

6.1 Introduction
This thesis examines how housing histories shape tenants’ sense of home in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak. In particular, this thesis explores and discusses the ways in which low income households, who came from different housing histories (characterised by tenure, housing conditions and household configurations) experience home in temporary public housing. There were three motivations for carrying out this thesis. First, the dimension of ‘housing history’ is under-explored in current scholarly work on explorations of sense of home. Thus far, the relationship between these two matters (housing history and sense of home) has been implied in previous studies but only Tomas and Dittmar (1995) have discussed this relationship as central to their work. Clearly, there is a gap waiting to be filled in this scholarly space. Second, this study introduces a social context from a middle income nation where access to welfare assistance is lacking. This context is unlike the high income, often English-speaking regions that profoundly shape contemporary knowledge about home as so much scholarly literature is written about and for them. The narratives that construct this thesis originate from low income families, an under-explored area in the current academic literature examining the sense of home (in either western or non-western contexts). Finally, this study takes place in a situation where public housing tenure is uncertain. This housing context, is contrary to long-term, secure housing – conventional and unconventional – that profoundly contributes to contemporary knowledge about home and the sense of home. In other words, the literature on home tends to neglect housing with temporary or fixed-term tenures. Examining sense of home in a situation where housing tenure is uncertain, along with the aforementioned contexts, are the gaps filled by this thesis.

This study draws upon two theoretical approaches that are central to contemporary housing studies, namely the critical geographies of home and the life-course approach to housing options, to examine this research question: In what ways do tenants’ housing histories shape their sense of home in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak? In answering this
question, literature emphasising the life-course is used is to examine how households’ circumstances and the housing market context lead to certain housing outcomes (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Van Ham, 2012), with an empirical focus on low income households in Sarawak’s public housing. Rather than concluding that low income families have little choice but to reside in housing of certain, inadequate, material qualities, the analysis takes a different path concluding that certain housing outcomes, denoted by the lived experiences of home in interviewees’ housing histories, are critical in producing a sense of home in the said housing. The emotive dimensions of interviewees’ housing (i.e. their sense of home) are examined using insights from critical geographies of home. This thesis importantly highlights the trade-offs that low income households have to make, particularly with regard to their sense of home in public housing. How the trade-offs are carried out and how some interviewees tolerated certain unfavourable situations in public housing, are very much shaped by their housing histories, as we shall recap in the next section.

There are two sections in this chapter. The first section discusses the key findings of this thesis and its contribution to this scholarly space (sense of home). I then turn, in the second section, to suggestions for future research.

6.2 Seven Key Findings of this Thesis

In this section, I outline seven key findings derived from this thesis. I discuss each finding in relation to their contribution to current scholarly work, as reviewed in the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Two.

6.2.1 To the low income, housing security does not necessarily lead to a sense of home

Housing security denoted by tenure longevity, is thought to be important in constructing people’s sense of home in their housing. As such, current studies investigating home are framed using the context of homeownership or other forms of housing where occupants have a significant amount of housing security, often defined by longevity in tenure (Chin, 2004; Cook et al., 2013; Dowling & Power, 2012; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Easthope, 2004, 2014; Hiscock et al., 2001; Lee & Yip, 2006). In contrast, this thesis uncovers that housing security does not necessarily lead to a sense of home for low income households residing in less adequate housing in Sarawak. My argument is evidenced by the fact that a significant number of interviewees who have lived in parental homes and private rental housing had
the opportunity to reside there indefinitely, yet all of them decided to relocate into public housing due to various inadequacies that they experienced in their former housing. Within these relatively more secure housing options (parental homes, private rentals), tenants reported a deprived sense of homeliness in various aspects of their domestic lives, ranging from having little control over managing their household finances to the inability to perform household chores effectively. A prolonged sense of unhomeliness forced tenants to leave this more secure housing and move into fixed-term public housing, a tenure type without guaranteed longevity. This finding shows that housing security alone is not always a prominent factor in shaping people’s homeliness in their housing. In fact, housing security, and the circumstances of that housing need to be observed together, in order to gain a better understanding of the different ways that a sense of home is constructed and negotiated in people’s daily experiences.

As mentioned earlier, the current literature suggests a positive link between housing security and sense of home, and I have established that the findings of this thesis disagree with that view. Therefore, it is pertinent that we understand the contexts that shape the view (housing security leads to the sense of home) in the literature. A deeper look into the literature suggests that the view is in fact, limited to some extent. First, I found that existing studies on home have taken place in regions where there is a significant amount of state intervention in the provision of affordable housing. These regions (where studies focusing on the ‘house as a home’ have been carried out) include the UK, Australia, Europe and Hong Kong. Second, the occupants in these studies have legal rights to use the dwellings regardless of their housing tenures. This is to say that they are recognised as rightful owners or primary tenants of a dwelling unit, who can occupy the unit and to use it as they wish. Within this purview, some scholars have argued that homeowners and tenants have different degrees of autonomy in terms of what they can do with their dwelling units (see Hiscock et al., 2001; Saunders, 1989), yet the different access to property rights do not hamper people’s sense of home in their respective dwellings (for example, see Mee, 2007; Newton, 2008). Third, existing studies tend to capture the home experiences of single persons or nuclear households (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Mee, 2007). Therefore, what we currently know about the home may not translate over to other types of households. Fourth, occupants are likely to have access to adequate housing, except for a study that
examined home-making practices in the slums in Mexico (see Kellett & Moore, 2003). Another important attribute that informs the contexts of the current literature is the reference to western culture that promotes independence and individual privacy. Together, these attributes are likely to form a positive tie between tenure longevity and the sense of home.

My study unsettles the positive link between these two – tenure longevity and the sense of home – by introducing a different social context to gauge a better understanding of home. I shall now elaborate the attributes that frame the context of this thesis. First, Malaysia is a non-welfare state, which means that there is minimal state intervention in housing provision for people on low incomes. The minimal state intervention dictates certain policy actions, as presented in Chapter Five, which in return, have shaped residents’ sense of home in public housing. Second, most of the occupants in this study have (or have had) little or no legal property rights, except for those who used to reside in the workers’ quarters. In the parental home and private rental housing, the ‘rights’ to reside in the dwelling are based on mutual understanding, often with little autonomy in occupants’ ability to utilise the dwelling as they wish. Third, a substantial number of interviewees used to reside in parental homes within multi-generational households. In many cases, the sense of unhomeliness appears to be more profound in the parental home, potentially due to the absence of property rights by the adult sons or daughters. Here, the absence of property rights in the parental home limits the use of the dwelling unit by the extended family members. The absence of property rights does not mean limited length of stay in the parental homes, and this is due to the strong sense of filiation in Asian cultures. This includes the sense of filiation towards parents by the children and vice versa. As we have seen in Chapter Four, the sense of unhomeliness experienced in the parental homes is compounded by this very effect of filiation. Interviewees had to adjust their lifestyle to suit the routines and preferences of their parents who are the outright owners of the house. This finding lends support to Easthope et al. (2015), who found that legal ownership turns out to be an important dimension that ‘could influence [how] multigenerational household members felt in control and at home in their dwelling’ in Australia (p. 159). However, the extent to which legal ownership is superior to family rank in a Sarawak household (i.e. does a son who owns the
house have more say than his co-residing mother?) is worth exploring, due to the strong filiation that frames family relationships in Asian households.

The first key finding shows that housing security does not necessarily produce a sense of home (as purported in the current literature). In fact, this view is only applicable to the certain contexts that I have identified above. By bringing in a different set of circumstances, this thesis demonstrates a critical understanding of how housing security influences people’s sense of home, by incorporating housing and social contexts into the analysis.

### 6.2.2 Housing security is not entirely defined by tenure longevity

The current literature positions the paramount importance of tenure longevity as a defining feature of housing security. Similarly, the idea of housing security in public housing is often tied to tenure longevity, made possible by affordable rental in this sector (Hiscock et al., 2001; Lee & Yip, 2006; Mee, 2007). More recently, Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2014) critique the moves made to ‘withdraw guaranteed security of tenure in social housing’ in Australia, the UK and New Zealand through the introduction of fixed-term tenancies (FTTs). This debate demonstrates the strong influence of tenure longevity on how housing security is understood; presuming without it, tenants would experience feelings of insecurity. In other words, the concept is strongly defined through a legal framework, that is, the public housing policy in the said regions. Hulse and Milligan (2014) comment on the limitations of the definition, which they argue is unable to capture the ‘different layers’ that complicate housing security. In their work focusing on the private rental housing sector in Australia, they have identified *de jure, de facto* and perceptual security of tenure as the dimensions that construct housing security. The second key finding of this thesis echoes their work and contributes to earlier work, by positioning how this concept translates into the context of low income households in Sarawak.

Having said this, it is important to note that this thesis adopts the legal framework as an entry point to unpack how housing security translates into the Sarawak social context. By this definition, given the fixed tenure coupled with the presence of an exit policy, tenure longevity in the Sarawak public housing is uncertain and therefore, can be considered as ‘insecure’. I have used this term occasionally in the preceding chapters to reflect tenure insecurity in Sarawak public rental housing (when observed from the legal framework). This
entry point has led to other insightful meanings of housing security, as given in the following paragraph.

Despite the presence in Sarawak of the exit policy for public housing (tenants are required to leave public housing after the six-year maximum lease) most tenants in Kuching believed that they could stay on in public housing indefinitely. There are two reasons for this confidence. First, tenants were quick to learn that the exit policy is not strictly enforced, although the presence of this policy implies the potential termination of their lease. Tenants put aside the latter possibility. The lack of enforcement that characterises housing governance generally in Sarawak public housing enhances tenants’ sense of housing security. Sarawak Housing Corporation (SHC) has been known in the past to give tenants extensions beyond the six-year mark. Because all tenants are governed by the same agency, some interviewees do not see why they would be treated any differently from the tenants who have been granted the additional extension. Second (and in line with this), interviewees focus on becoming ‘good tenants’ (see Flint, 2004), believing that tenants with good payment records and good behaviour are more likely to be given lease extensions. They are able to keep to this strategy because the rent in public housing is affordable. In other words, housing affordability is another defining feature of housing security to the low income tenants included in this study. The significance of housing affordability on people’s sense of housing security in public housing is identified in earlier works (see Hiscock et al., 2001; Mee, 2007; Taylor, 2012). My thesis states the similar importance of housing affordability, not only to ensure continuity of the lease in Sarawak public housing but also as a means to show tenants’ worthiness as responsible, paying tenants, if they had to ‘compete’ for the opportunity to continue staying there. Here, the non-enforcement of the exit policy creates another, and arguably a more profound, meaning of housing affordability – to demonstrate tenants’ worthiness in the eyes of the housing managers who have the power to decide who can be in or out of the facility. These two dimensions that influence people’s sense of housing security have been identified in Hulse and Milligan (2014) but within the context of secure occupancy in Australian private rental. This thesis concurs with them by adding that the dimensions also prevail in other housing and social contexts.
6.2.3 Housing history importantly shapes people’s sense of home

The third key finding emphasises the significance of housing histories in shaping tenants’ sense of home in Sarawak public housing. This finding undermines the popular view in the literature of home that tenure longevity is the principle feature necessary for a sense of home to occur. In other words, tenants’ housing histories appear to have stronger effects on the formation of their sense of home in public housing, than tenure longevity. This finding brings forward the importance of housing histories in influencing a sense of home; a connection purported by Lewin (2001) more than a decade ago. Despite the scarcity of scholarly work connecting the two as the central analysis, there are studies which have hinted at the effects of people’s past housing experiences on the meanings that they attach to home. For example, public housing is considered a ‘haven’ due to its affordability (Mee, 2007), house as home amongst people who are sleeping rough (Parsell, 2012) and home is the place where there are ubiquitous utilities like hot water for showering (Wiesel et al., 2012). To date, only Tomas and Dittmar (1995) have examined this relationship in detail, arguing that housing histories profoundly shape the relative meanings that people attach to home.

Current studies tend to examine the meanings of home in different social and housing contexts but with little attention as to how these meanings are created. One possible way to do so is to interrogate the effects of housing histories, as demonstrated in this thesis.

As observed in the current literature, the meanings of home are created within the context of middle-class, nuclear families living in single-family dwellings found in more developed, English speaking regions (Dowling & Power, 2012; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Fincher, 2004; Fincher & Gooder, 2007). Similarly, current studies examining home from the perspective of low income populations are framed within a context where poor and vulnerable groups have access to more comprehensive social services (compared to Malaysia). Therefore, studies about home framed by the western contexts tend to assume certain housing forms are accessible to the occupants regardless of income, class and gender. At minimum, it is self-contained housing with a certain amount of allocated space, and it is rightly so because these regions strictly regulate the basic requirements of housing standards. In other words, current studies, particularly those coming from more developed countries, have not paid much attention to other contexts that are equally important in shaping the meanings of
home (except for several studies about homelessness and meanings of home that I have identified earlier in this sub-section).

Following Tomas and Dittmar (1995), this thesis observes the extent to which tenants’ sense of home in public housing corresponds to the favourable or unfavourable experiences in their former housing. As demonstrated in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the sense of home in public housing is in fact, highly attributable to the ‘lack of’ as well as ‘fulfilled’ housing needs that tenants experienced in their former housing. This is to say that the senses of home between the two places (former housing and current housing) are relative. More importantly, this study highlights the significance of basic housing needs, such as having access to an independent, self-contained housing unit in producing the poor’s sense of home in Sarawak public housing. As I have mentioned earlier, this basic provision of housing is often taken for granted. We have learned the different housing inadequacies experienced by the interviewees in their former housing; this includes a substantial number of respondents who did not have access to independent housing or self-contained accommodation prior to entering public housing. Therefore, the stories about control and autonomy presented in this thesis are not only about whether residents can renovate or decorate their housing, but are more about the ‘little things’ resulting from having access to a self-contained single-family dwelling, for example, having the autonomy to decide how to spend the household’s income away from the influence of extended families or the ability to organise family life around access to clean water and one’s own kitchen. These stories highlight the significance of very basic social reproduction activities that represent people’s sense of homeliness or unhomeliness in this part of the world. In short, the interrogations about housing histories focus on the significance of these ‘small’ events, rather than understanding them as ‘routine and mundane’ in everyday practices, as expressed in the home literature.

The interrogation of housing history has provided an avenue for a critical examination of home experiences among the poor. This is another important contribution of this thesis. Rather than treating low income households in Sarawak public housing as a homogeneous group, my work critically teases out their differences by examining how housing histories shape their present sense of home. This explains the primary categorisation of the respondents by their housing histories: parental home, private rental housing, squatter
settlement and workers’ quarters. In this, the thesis captures the distinct experiences that correspond to the different housing histories that importantly create tenants’ sense of home. For example, tenants who used to reside in the parental home associate privacy with the ability to keep their own family problems from the knowledge of others, while privacy for former squatter settlers results from the ability to take baths in a fully enclosed bathroom. Indeed, this thesis has answered the call made by Lewin (2001) to include home histories in the examination of home. In doing so, this thesis furthers the importance of home histories, as rationalised by Lewin, by carrying out critical analysis of home using this perspective.

Certainly, understanding home by the typologies of housing histories is insufficient. This thesis requires more layers of analysis to demonstrate its contribution in this scholarly space. Key findings four, five and six reflect the insights of the critical geographies of home that have been used in this thesis.

The critical geographies of home advanced by Blunt and Dowling (2006), have been helpful in allowing the observation of people’s sense of home through a critical lens. Three components form this body of work. The first component is that the home is material and imaginative. In brief, this component argues that the home is a both a place with special meanings or feelings attached to it. As examined in Chapter Two, the term ‘imaginative’ includes the feelings and activities that residents engage in to create a homely home. The second component emphasises the importance of power relations and identity in shaping the sense of home. This thesis uncovers different layers and types of power relations that profoundly influence interviewees’ sense of home in both former housing and public housing. The last component covers the porosity and the multi-scalar nature of home, where Blunt and Dowling (2006) identify that the home is developed by the interactions between the domestic and extra-domestic and vice versa, through the public and political worlds we inhibit. It is important to note that some specific experiences cannot be fully explained using a single one of these components, rather, they may be attributable to several components. To aid the discussions, I discuss specific experiences of housing with reference to specific components but with mention of other components where necessary to show the links between them.
6.2.4 The home is both material and imaginative: bringing the ‘little things’ into the picture

Moving on, the fourth key finding concurs with the current literature, which argues that the ways in which people experience home are both material and imaginative (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012). In particular, studies about home reflecting this component capture how meanings of home translate across different housing tenures (see Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Easthope, 2014; Lee & Yip, 2006; Mee, 2007) and housing forms (Fincher, 2004; Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Newton, 2008; Yuen et al., 2006). Some studies examine the appropriation of a living space (see Clapham, 2011) or the ways in which home-making practices reflect the meanings of home (see Cook et al., 2013; Newton, 2008). Although there are studies about home covering other regions (see Erdayu et al., 2012; Kellett & Moore, 2003), studies coming from western contexts dominate the literature. As mentioned in the second key finding, these studies tend to capture the lived experiences of home in nuclear-family dwellings, found in apartments or single-family housing. The focus of these studies are occupants who already have, in the crudest expression, adequate housing – with access to clean water, electricity, kitchen or bathroom. As shown in this thesis, self-contained housing is not accessible to all. Given this, the material and imaginative aspects of home reported in these studies are relevant only to their own contexts.

This thesis explores the sense of home attributable to basic social reproduction activities by providing two sets of narratives on how low income families in Sarawak experience home – materially and imaginatively – in their former housing and present public housing. In the former housing, tenants’ material and imaginative experiences of home are the result of specific vulnerabilities of the said housing arrangements. For example, tenants who used to live in a very basic squatter house lacked a sense of privacy (imaginative) in the bathrooms as these spaces are not fully enclosed (material). These experiences in tenants’ former housing shaped their specific material and imaginative experiences of home in public housing. Hence, for the former squatter settlers, living in public housing means having adequate privacy, especially for women, as they now can take baths in fully enclosed bathrooms. In this sense, housing history becomes an important dimension that helps to tease out the ‘little things’ in family life that lead to a sense of home for low income families. These ‘little things’, ranging from budgeting monthly expenses to planning when to
wash or cook, are very basic activities of social reproduction that tend to be neglected in the literature.

6.2.5 Three layers of power relations (and identity) that shape a sense of home

The next component of the critical geographies of home asks us to reflect on the effects of power-relations and identity on the meanings that people attach to home. Past studies have revealed that lived experiences of home are shaped by power dynamics and identity in the household, exemplified particularly by the narratives about women’s inferior position in the house (Bograd, 1988; Hennessy, 2009; Nelson et al., 1990). There also views arguing that men and women experience home not unequally, but rather, differently (Saunders, 1989). The literature also captures the alienation felt by people with gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) identities who have lived in households with heterosexual expectations (Elwood, 2000; Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2008). Current discussions about power-relations and identity are confined to male-female roles and expectations, again in the context of nuclear heterosexual households in developed countries. More studies have started to interrogate people’s sense of home in multi-generational households (Easthope et al., 2015; Keene & Batson, 2010) but they are confined to western contexts where individual rights and privacy are of paramount importance (Ozaki, 2002). At a larger scale, the effects of power-relations are interrogated within the dimension of housing governance, particularly in the contexts of low income private rental housing and public housing, where tenants are expected to abide by certain conditions in their tenancy contracts (see Deacon, 2004; Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Truman, 2003).

Located within the Sarawak context, this thesis introduces other attributes that form power-relations and identity to interrogate a sense of home. The pronounced attributes are cultural expectations and power-relations in multi-generational households and the effects of religion and ethnicity. These attributes significantly shape the lived experiences of home at the household level. Beyond the household level, there are power-relations characterised by the landlord-tenant relationship in private rental housing, the enforcers-squatter settlers relationship in squatter settlements and the housing manager-tenant relationship in Sarawak public housing. When observed closely, there are three levels of power relations identified in this thesis – within the household level, within the sector exemplified by the landlord-tenant relationship and within state or policy levels. This is an important
contribution of the thesis as it identifies the different types and layers of power-relations that influence people’s sense of home in this part of the world.

As demonstrated in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, power-relations and identity largely construct the experiences of unhomeliness across the different housing histories. These experiences range from: not having control over managing household finances due to the culture of filiation that seems to intensify in the multi-generational parental home, to having to accept unfair rental terms set by proprietors in private rental housing, to becoming a regular recipient of eviction notices in the squatter settlements. In the context of this study, the power-relations in the parental home appear to have had the strongest effect in creating a sense of unhomeliness, given interviewees pay the most attention to their sense of homeliness inside the dwelling and such power play mainly occurs within domestic space. Given the importance of religion in this social context, the lack of privacy in interviewees’ former housing is not only about the lack of opportunity to form self-identity, but it is also about one’s inability to carry out family life as mandated in Islam. Racial identification similarly, has produced specific experiences of home when examined at the block, staircase or floor level (where tenants share a similar culture except in one estate) or when observed as a heterogeneous public housing estate (except in one estate). As this thesis unpacks the different layers of power-relations, it shows that these relationships that potentially threaten people’s sense of home are not confined to the power dynamics within the household (see Easthope et al., 2015), but also are extra-domestic. Across the different housing arrangements, men and women experience unhomeliness in different ways, echoing Saunders (1989). Then again, women have always been the usual actors who negotiate the various senses of unhomeliness, a fact attributable to the patriarchal culture that encourages women to remain in the domestic realm.

6.2.6 Home is open and multi-scalar: Discerning between sense of home across different spatial scales

The sixth key finding of this thesis turns on the notion that the home is open and multi-scalar and that a sense of home is about more than the dwelling. In the literature, a ‘porous home’ means the ways in which the home creates influence on, and is influenced by the extra-domestic (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Fincher & Gooder, 2007; Marston, 2000; Massey, 1994, 1995). It is important to note that the porosity of the home has been reflected rather
comprehensively in the literature although much of these studies do not take this component as the centre of analysis. In the literature, the porosity of the home has been popularly observed through home-making practices in the context of diaspora or simply as a reflection of meaningful memories (see 'British homes in India' in Blunt & Dowling, 2006, pp. 150-153; Cook et al., 2013; Lauster, 2013; Newton, 2008). Other studies capture the meanings of home in light of access to housing equity (Cook et al., 2013; Smith, 2008) and how governance affects people’s sense of home (Deacon, 2004; Easthope, 2014; Slater, 2006). The lived experiences of home in the literature are shaped by the events occurring at various spatial scales, from transnational to regional and local levels. The multi-scalar experiences of home, the second aspect of this component, are illustrated using discussions surrounding the sense of belonging at various spatial scales. In fact, there are substantial materials on a sense of home in the neighbourhood within western contexts. With some notable exceptions (see Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2010) many of these studies do not discriminate between the sense of home (belonging) occurring at the different spatial scales.

The findings of this thesis agree with much of the material from the research examining neighbourhood and neighbourliness that demonstrates the multi-scalar experiences of home. The porosity of the home in this study, although largely evidenced by ‘extra-domestic’ events that occur within the limited boundaries of the estates or the locations where the public housing estates are located, has contributed to new knowledge in this scholarly field. This study illustrates the significance of daily practices that occur in nearby spaces that lead to a sense of homeliness or unhomeliness in people’s place of residence, ranging from daily interactions with neighbours, utilising outdoor spaces to hang washing or using the open spaces in the estates to start businesses or grow food. These ‘mundane’ activities, as discovered in this thesis, are significant to the production of the interviewees’ sense of home in public housing. The more important contributions of this thesis, with regard to an ‘open and multi-scalar’ home, are explored further below.

This thesis offers two contributions to the idea that the home is open and multi-scalar. First, in demonstrating the porosity of the home, this thesis shows the importance and more detailed effect of housing history in influencing a sense of home. Echoing the work of Tomas and Dittmar (1995), the specific ways in which a sense of home was produced in public
housing was influenced by what tenants had or did not have in their former housing. This is to say that a sense of home is relative and open to renegotiations as people’s housing experiences change. Although in the literature, Massey (1995) mentions the significance of the past, her discussions focus more on the effects of tradition and its continuity between places. My study shows that the ‘past’ is more than just about traditions but rather includes favourable and unfavourable aspects of people’s past housing shaped by personal and institutional circumstances. In fact, the importance of housing history stretches beyond the present, when interviewees’ future housing aspirations are informed by their past. Their past has taught them that there is no better housing opportunity than public housing. Therefore, for many respondents, they openly wished to own the units that they are currently occupying to escape the past. For a small number of extremely poor respondents, their housing aspirations are clearly shaped by the past (i.e. they would rather stay in a hut with reliable water supply but with no electricity) as the three-bedroom and two-bathroom public housing is ‘too high-end’ for them.

The second contribution of this thesis demarcates the sense of belonging across different spatial scales, particularly between the inside and outside of the dwelling unit. According to Anton and Lawrence (2014), people feel more belonging to their dwelling than to their neighbourhood due to the clear property boundaries that signify people’s control within this space. This study partially agrees with their view, if we consider both former and public housing. In the past, most tenants felt unhomely inside their housing but they had relatively better experiences with their neighbours or the neighbourhood they were residing in. Tenants in public housing generally feel belonging to their dwelling and the neighbourhood but at the same time they also reported unfavourable experiences in the neighbourhood. While I cannot make a claim that tenants feel more belonging to their dwelling than to their neighbourhood in the past, I can be certain that tenants feel more belonging to their rental unit than to the neighbourhood in public housing. This is evidenced by tenants’ ability to tolerate the unfavourable incidents that occur outside the dwelling (e.g. crime, unfriendly neighbours, dirty hallways). The attachment to their housing unit is evident when tenants try to prolong their stay in public housing by being a responsible tenant, and when they are served with reminder notices, they try their best to settle the arrears. Their sense of belonging to the housing unit is also exemplified by their home-making practices, such as
repainting their unit and dealing with the issue of pipe blockage. Not only does this thesis agree with past studies that people’s sense of belonging to their housing unit is strongest compared to the other place scales (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2010, 2011), it also demonstrates the different attitudes held, and the amount of effort shown, by low income households towards their housing units in comparison to their efforts at the neighbourhood level.

6.2.7 Sense of home results from trade-offs that low income households make in their housing decisions

The literature on housing decision-making shows that households often make trade-offs in their housing choices. The majority of these studies are framed using economic determinants, often focusing on trade-offs among these housing characteristics: housing space, commuting time, residential locations and lifestyle choices (see Brun & Fagnani, 1994; Chen et al., 2008; Winger, 1969). The life-course perspective on the other hand, captures economic and non-economic determinants that shape housing options available to households (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Van Ham, 2012). This perspective offers a more comprehensive examination of housing options as well as the trade-offs that households have to make following their life-courses. For example, Clark (2013) studies the effects of life events on a households’ decision to relocate, Fincher (2004) critiques the normative view attached to high-rise city living (i.e. for young professionals or empty nesters) which produces housing design unsuitable for households with children. Feijten and Mulder (2005) make a link between housing quality and the length of time ‘spent’ in a life-course event; for example, delaying childbearing leads to better housing quality and being unemployed results in poor housing quality. More importantly, the life-course perspective acknowledges the few options that the poor have in terms of their housing choices, which in turn produce certain experiences of home. Because the poor are often left with residual options, they have to cope with unfavourable living experiences in their place of residence (see Gilbert & Ward, 1982; Habib et al., 2009; Hiscock et al., 2001; Kleinhans et al., 2010). In this thesis, we learned how interviewees made choices within very limited housing options as they contemplated between economic determinants, for example, the cost of rental in public housing and the distance to their workplaces. As a matter of fact, the trade-offs that interviewees made are beyond economic determinants.
This thesis introduces the ways in which trade-offs are effectively made by the tenants in Sarawak public housing. In particular, the trade-offs are about making a decision between the advantages that tenants gain between their former housing and public housing. How they decide on which benefits to trade-off is largely informed by the priority placed on their sense of home across the different spatial scales, that is, sense of home within the four walls and sense of home in the neighbourhood. In the past, interviewees experienced various advantages and disadvantages associated with their housing. For example, although interviewees who used to live in the parental home had little control over their own family life, some had reliable help with child care rendered by their extended families. Similarly, the disadvantages of rooming accommodation in shop-houses were offset by the strategic location of these dwellings. As noted in the thesis, tenants made various adjustments in their former housing but over time, prolonged adjustments do not seem to have been a favourable option given the overwhelming housing deficits (Morris et al., 1988). To illustrate, the disadvantages of living in a squatter settlement (such as no access to clean water, no proper toilet and regular intimidations by state officials), outweigh the advantages that residents used to experience there, namely housing affordability and good neighbours. Compared to tenants’ former housing, public housing is a ‘haven’ although there are reports of unfavourable incidents taking place around the estate. Because tenants placed more emphasis on their sense of homeliness inside the dwelling, they tolerated the unfavourable experiences that occurred outside the boundaries of their home. In other words, tenants are not willing to trade away the sense of homeliness that they now experience inside the dwelling. Now that they have access to a homely home, many will do what it takes to keep that home because to them, currently, there is no other home available like their home in public housing.

This key finding demonstrates one universal value shared by almost all interviewees pertaining to their housing despite the subjective experiences reported in the thesis. For the poor, their priority is to have access to an affordable and secure home that they can claim as their own. Through various home-making practices, many have shown their sense of ‘ownership’ to the dwelling unit. Only when tenants have access to their own place (even through temporary Sarawak public housing) they are able to make specific trade-offs between the advantages of the old place and the new place, which produce specific senses
of homeliness (or unhomeliness) in the current dwelling. At the end of the day, interviewees’ decisions centre on whether the benefits of the home that they are experiencing in public housing are worth defending. Most interviewees agree to maintain their home in public housing.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

There are certain unavoidable limitations in this thesis, and in this section I would like to address two limitations of this thesis.

The first limitation relates to diversity in the sample size. This study included interviewees with diverse criteria. However, due to the absence of baseline data which could be used to indicate if the sample was adequate to mirror the population on site, the baseline information used was solely derived from the data collected in the sample survey. This is to say that if the sample is biased to begin with, then it is likely that respondents recruited in the semi-structured interviews are less representative of the actual population than is desirable. In particular, I would like to have interviewed more Chinese residents or single mothers. Having said this, I have offset this limitation to some extent by recruiting other respondents with certain criteria using snowball sampling and the amount of diversity in this sample size was the best able to be attained within the time dedicated to data collection.

Another limitation worth highlighting is the extent to which the findings in this thesis are applicable in practice. In other words, how can the findings be used to inform policy? Although this thesis’s research question is fundamentally tied to the unique public rental housing policy in Sarawak, its intention has not been to evaluate the policy in order to improve it. This thesis could contribute to policy development, but only to the extent of informing policy makers that, (i) low income families require long term access to public rental housing and, (ii) that the state needs a larger supply of affordable housing of reasonable conditions to ease the housing stress faced by low income families. These solutions however, have been long known. The minor contribution of my thesis in terms of policy implementation is to be expected then, because the goal of this thesis is in fact, to contribute to the literature by using this case study to extend what is currently understood about the sense of home and how it comes about.
6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Following this study, I include three recommendations for future work. They stem from the observations made during the course of this study, which I believe warrant further investigation.

6.4.1 A closer look at women’s and men’s housing histories in shaping a sense of home in Sarawak public housing

During my fieldwork, some respondents shared interesting and meaningful experiences not of direct relevance to this thesis. For example, SQ2 (female, aged in 30s, formerly resided in the parental home) noticed changes in her husband’s behaviour after they moved into public housing. Her husband is more serious about keeping his job now, compared to when they were still in the parental home. In other words, her husband is more responsible and dependable since they began to live independently. This comment brings us to the first potential future research direction, which is that of women’s and men’s lived experiences of home in former and public housing. More about how women’s and men’s home histories and how residing in public housing has an impact on their prescribed and ascribed roles, would be an important matter to study. Perhaps a close focus on women’s experience and sense of home is even more significant to this study. This thesis was made possible by the substantial number of the female interviewees who made themselves available. The study was driven by the notion that household practices are heavily gendered, yet little is known about how women of low income experience home in a complex, culturally-defined situation in Asia.

6.4.2 Examining sense of home in multi-generation households in Sarawak

The sense of home in multigenerational households has lately gained attention (Easthope et al., 2015; Klocker & Gibson, 2013; Klocker et al., 2012), although Anderson (1972) explored a similar topic much earlier. More studies are needed to address how multigenerational households experience home, and it should be one of the directions taken to further this thesis. A substantial number of households in Sarawak are multigenerational families, where the reasons that lead to the formation of such households are not entirely tied to economic necessity, but potentially because of children’s desire to take care of their parents as they age. Therefore, in the Sarawak context, multigenerational households can be observed
across different social classes. While this thesis has demonstrated how people in low income multigenerational households experience home, there is a need to examine how the home is experienced by multigenerational families belonging to other income groups. The purpose of this research is to contribute knowledge to the emerging studies examining how home is experienced in multigenerational households, by using a social context where cultural practices are heavily denoted by filiations.

6.4.3 Tenants’ sense of home in post-Sarawak public housing

My final recommendation for further study is to examine how the experience of home changes after tenants leave public housing. Two things could form the focus. First, it is to document tenants’ housing pathways after they have left public housing and second, to compare their experiences of home in the new settings. The unit of analysis could be tenants who have voluntarily left public housing, to examine if their housing pathways follow the goals embedded in the housing policy, and the goals they may have set for themselves. It is important to note that public housing serves as a feeder to the low-cost housing program funded by the government. There could be two contributions from such an exercise. First, it would set out to investigate if housing histories continue to shape people’s sense of home and I predict this link would remain substantial in this proposal. Second, in tracking post-public-housing housing pathways, the extent to which the goals embedded in the public rental housing policy (to help people enter owner-occupation through the low-cost housing program) can materialise, would become clear. Evidence of the other housing pathways not accounted for in the public rental housing policy could also be described. Not only would such research contribute knowledge on the housing pathways of low income households in Sarawak, it also might help to identify potential problems in the current housing policy of Sarawak, which could be used to improve the public rental housing policy and other such programs.
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241


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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE POLICY IMPLEMENTERS AT THE STATE LEVEL

1. What is the policy statement that guides the implementations of the public rental housing program in Sarawak?

2. Based on the statement, what are the conditions for residing in the public rental facility? Do you know if this condition applies uniformly across all the states? If yes, in what ways that the Sarawak’s implementations are different from other states? How do you adjust the requirements or conditions? Why is the state adjusting the conditions in such a way?

3. Why do you think there are certain conditions set in the policy (i.e. temporariness, only families)?

4. Do you think tenants should be given temporary tenancy? If yes/no, what are the reasons for that view? Is your view different from that of others who are implementing the policy?

5. In your view, how much have tenants benefitted from the facility?

6. Some people claim that tenants are depending on welfare and they are complacent after residing in public housing, what do you think of such a claim?

7. Have there been any changes to the policy since its implementation in 1994? The changes may include tenant eligibility criteria, the origin of the households, amount of rental, length of tenancy, conditions for lease renewal and probably the physical aspects of public housing (size and location) or other aspects not mentioned here. If there are changes, what are the reasons behind the changes?

8. Have the tenants’ profile change ever since (the changes took place)? How do the changes affect the role of the agency?

9. Define ‘problematic’ tenants. Who are the ‘problematic’ tenants? How often do you encounter ‘problematic’ tenants?

10. In your view, what are the reasons that cause them to ‘problematic’? How do you manage ‘problematic’ tenants? If tenants are evicted, where do they go after eviction?

11. In your experience, how many of them are reluctant to move out after their lease ended? Are there reasons for tenants’ reluctance to leave public housing? Is there a general pattern (profile) of tenants who are reluctant to leave the facility (e.g. single parent, lower income households, larger households)?
12. Has there been assessment done to evaluate the effectiveness of the program? If yes, please explain how the program is considered meeting its objectives or otherwise.
# APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH CURRENT TENANTS OF PUBLIC HOUSING

## Themes and questions

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<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Reason for moving into public housing</strong></td>
<td>Housing histories has a large effect in shaping a sense of home.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Based on the information you provided in the survey form, can you share your experiences residing in the past two dwellings? <em>(Location, accessibility to services and work place, living arrangement, space utility, household economy, relationship with other household members, experiences with private landlords)</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Why do you decide to move into public housing?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. How is living in public housing different from the experiences of residing in your previous dwelling(s)? <em>(Location, accessibility to services and work place, living arrangement, space utility, household economy, relationship with other household members, experiences with private landlords)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>Temporary tenancy in public housing</strong></td>
<td>In what way housing insecurity has been communicated or acted upon tenants and the extent to which their sense of home is threatened.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a. What do you think about the temporary tenancy given to tenants? Can you share using your own experiences how the condition has been implemented thus far and how have you responded to it?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Does the temporary nature of the tenancy make you feel unsettled, that you may lose this shelter anytime? Why?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Do you think HDC is strict in enforcing their rules (e.g. maximum tenancy)? How does that make you feel? Do you feel threatened by the enforcement?</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Home in public housing</strong></td>
<td>These six questions will capture a wide array of information related to the lived experiences of home in public housing. I have ranked the themes of ‘good things’ (in bold) based on the finding from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Do you feel ‘at home’ living in public housing? In what way do you feel at home (or not at home)?</td>
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<td>b. What are the good things about this public housing as a place to live? How have these ‘good things’ benefited your family? <em>(Sense of independence, privacy, control, comfort, space, location which may entail social support)</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Give examples how living in public housing may be unpleasant to you? How do you manage them? <em>(Uncertainty of tenancy, bodily safety especially)</em></td>
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children, property safety, design of the block, ‘unfamiliar’ neighbourhood unlike ‘our old place/village’, closed doors, poor maintenance)

d. How much efforts have you put in to make this unit a more ‘homely’ place for you and your family? *(Relate to significant objects/space use in the unit: furniture, appliances, elements of security, home decoration inside and outside the unit, renovation, playground inside the unit. Conduct observations in the dwelling unit)*

e. How do you compare between the ‘good things’ and the unpleasant experiences of living in public housing? What makes it ‘worth it’ to stay here?

f. In your experience, how has your sense of home in public housing changed over time? How is the feeling when you first move in, compare to now?

5. Neighbours and the Neighbourhood

*a. In what way you normally interact with your neighbours? How often do you interact with your neighbours and who are the neighbours you normally interact with? (Neighbours from the similar floor, same block, different blocks)*

b. In what way the presence of your neighbours has made you feel more ‘at home’ (happy/comfortable) or less ‘at home’ in public housing? Give examples of the forms of interactions or activities that shape such feeling. *(May include religion/cultural based activities which involve neighbours from the same or different block, acts of certain neighbours that matters to the respondents)*

c. How does the sense of neighbourliness in this estate compare with your last neighbourhood? In your experience, how does constant tenant turnover affect the sense of neighbourliness in this estate?

d. Is your feeling of home is similar inside and outside your rental unit? If yes, in what way do you experience the differences?

e. To what extent do you utilize the common space within the block or this neighbourhood for your benefit? How

the preliminary fieldwork. In drafting these questions, I have taken into account that different people may experience home differently as attributed by their gender, age, marital status and ethnicity.

To tease out what it really means to tenants to reside in public housing.

Regular interactions may help one to feel belong in the neighbourhood. I also found that a neighbour’s act of rearing chicken or pets (although forbidden) has created uneasiness among neighbours in the same block.

Constant tenant turnover create volatile community, which may have effects on sense of home.

Sense of home may appear differently
would you be affected if you do not have access to the spaces for the activities you mentioned? (*Ranging from domestic to economic purposes: dry clothes, informal businesses, vegetable plots*)

inside or outside the rental unit.

I would like to see how the use of common areas for different activities has shape respondents’ meaning of home.

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<th>6.</th>
<th>Proximity to family members</th>
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<tr>
<td>a. Do you have family members residing near you inside or outside the estate that you see regularly? If yes, who are they? How often do you meet them and for what purpose?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. How important it is for you to have them around? If they are involved in providing regular social support, give example.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Which is more important to you; having access to public housing or being in proximity to family members who actively provide you with social support?</td>
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</table>

Getting social support from family members not living under the same roof is rather common and important, especially in child care.

I might revise this question to include respondents who are getting similar/paid social supports from their friends or neighbours.

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<th>7.</th>
<th>Housing Aspirations</th>
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<tr>
<td>a. What is your goal for your future home and why such goal? How do you plan to achieve it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Would you prefer if you could stay long term in public housing – say lifelong tenancy? If yes/no, why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would like to tease out respondents’ housing aspiration and what housing security means to them.
APPENDIX III: SURVEY FORM DISTRIBUTED TO CURRENT TENANTS IN PUBLIC HOUSING

DEPARTMENT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND GEOGRAPHY
MELBOURNE SCHOOL OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

Survey Form to Facilitate Data Collection in July – September 2014

PROJECT TITLE:
The Meanings of Home in Temporary Public Rental Housing in Sarawak

SECTION A: KINDLY PROVIDE INFORMATION TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. Gender:
   - [ ] Female
   - [ ] Male

2. Age: ______________ years old

3. Ethnicity:
   - [ ] Malay
   - [ ] Iban
   - [ ] Chinese
   - [ ] Other ethnicity, please state:
     ______________
4. Household’s Profile:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship to respondent</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How long have you been residing in public housing? Since ___________ (insert year)

6. Do you have family members or relatives outside/inside the estate (but not in the same house with you) that you see regularly? Yes / No

If yes, what is their relationship to you? ____________________________
7. State the previous two dwellings you resided in before entering public housing.

**Dwelling 1**

Where?: ______________________ Type of settlement: ______________________

With whom? __________________________________________________________

How long? ___________ years/months from ___________ until ____________

Tenure:

- Owner-occupation
- Parental home
- Private rental
- Private rental sharing with ________________________________
- Workers quarters
- Others: ________________________________

**Dwelling 2**

Where?: ______________________ Type of settlement: ______________________

With whom? _________________________________________________________

How long? ___________ years/months from ___________ until ____________

Tenure:

- Owner-occupation
- Parental home
- Private rental
SECTION B: CONSENT FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Thank you for spending time to complete this questionnaire. You may be selected to contribute to the later part of this study sometime between July and September 2014. Are you willing to involve in the second stage of this study? If yes, please leave the following details in the box and I will get in touch with you soon. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Haslina Hashim

Name: __________________________________________________________

Phone number: __________________________________________________

E-mail address: __________________________________________________

Estate/Unit No: __________________________________________________

Dear Sir/Madam:

Invitation:
Interview for my PhD research project entitled ‘The Meanings of Home in Temporary Public Rental Housing in Sarawak’

Introduction
My name is HASLINA HASHIM. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne (UoM), sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia and the research fieldwork is sponsored internally by department.

You are invited to participate in the above research project, which is supervised by Professor Ruth Fincher (Principal Supervisor) and DR Kate Shaw (Co-supervisor), Department of Resource Management and Geography, University of Melbourne. The research project has received University of Melbourne ethics approval.

The aim of the research is to investigate the extent to which tenants feel ‘at home’ as they reside in public housing in Sarawak.

What will you be asked to do?
This survey is carried out to capture information for the next stage of data collection in July-September 2014. Should you agree to participate in this survey, a questionnaire will be distributed and you will be interviewed face to face by an enumerator. The interview will take place at your place of residence. The questionnaire contains 7 questions mainly about your family background and your housing histories before moving into public housing.

It is going to be a structured interview. I estimate that the total time commitment required of you is 15 minutes. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, you are free to do so without prejudice. If you feel in any way under pressure, the interview will be terminated immediately.

How will your confidentiality be protected?
I intend to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of your responses to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law. Your name and contact details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. I will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity. The data will be kept
securely for five years from the date of publication, before being destroyed. A consent form for you to sign is attached to this letter.

**How will you receive feedback?**
If you are selected and participated in the second stage of the data collection, a brief report of the project outcomes will be sent to you by email on the completion of the project. The final thesis will be available in the reserves of the University of Melbourne. I am also planning to present the results of the field work at academic conferences or get them published in the journal.

**Further information**
Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact my supervisors: Professor Ruth Fincher via telephone +61 (3) 8344 0623 and/or by email r.fincher@unimelb.edu.au or Dr Kate Shaw via telephone +61 (3) 8344 0086 or by email kates@unimelb.edu.au. You are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, ph: +61 3 8344 2073–Ethics Application number 1339784.1.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,
Haslina HASHIM
PhD Student
Melbourne School of Land and Environment
Mobile (Australia): +61(4) 5001 7378
Mobile (Malaysia): +6(019) 467 4777
Email: hhashim@student.unimelb.edu.au
hh78.fung@gmail.com
APPENDIX V: CONSENT FORM FOR TENANTS’ PARTICIPATION IN SURVEY

DEPARTMENT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND GEOGRAPHY
MELBOURNE SCHOOL OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

Consent Form for Persons (Tenants) Participating in Survey

PROJECT TITLE:
The Meanings of Home in Temporary Public Rental Housing in Sarawak

Name of participant: ____________________________________________________________
Name of investigator(s): HASLINA HASHIM

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that my participation will involve a survey and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) the possible effects of participating in the survey have been explained to my satisfaction;
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   (c) the project is for the purpose of research;
   (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   (e) my name will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
   (f) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I participated in the second stage of data collection taking place in July – September 2014.

Participant signature: ____________________________________________ Date: ______________________

______________________________________________________________________________
# APPENDIX VI: INTERVIEWEES’ DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Household type in PH(^{13})</th>
<th>Years in PH</th>
<th>Housing history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PH1</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (4)(^{14})</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parental home (village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>PH2</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parental home (village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>PH3</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (4)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parental home (village)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>PH4</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kenyah</td>
<td>Nuclear (6)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parental home (in-laws’ in village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>PH5</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (4)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parental home (in-laws’ in medium-cost residential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>PH6</td>
<td>70s</td>
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<td>Nuclear (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>PH7</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Extended (10)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parental home (low-cost residential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>PH8</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Extended (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Parental home (village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>RE1</td>
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<td>Iban</td>
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<td>Private rental (house in village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>RE2</td>
<td>30s</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (3)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private rental (house in low-cost residential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>30s</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (4)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Private rental (house in village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Nuclear (2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Private rental (shop-house)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>RE5</td>
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<td>Nuclear (5)</td>
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<td>Private rental (house in village)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Nuclear (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private rental (house in medium-cost)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{13}\) PH is the abbreviation for ‘public housing’.

\(^{14}\) The number in the bracket indicates the size of the household residing in public housing.
<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Chinese</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Single mother (2)</td>
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<td>Iban</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>RO2</td>
<td>30s</td>
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<td>Iban</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Malay</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Extended (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>50s</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<td>Bidayuh</td>
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<td>Malay</td>
<td>Extended (6)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>SQ1</td>
<td>40s</td>
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<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>Nuclear (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Indonesian</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Bidayuh</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>QR4</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Extended (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author/s: Hashim, Haslina

Title: Linking the past to the present: housing history and the sense of home in temporary public rental housing in Sarawak

Date: 2017

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/194654

File Description: Linking the Past to the Present: Housing History and the Sense of Home in Temporary Public Rental Housing in Sarawak

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