

## 5 Memory, Housing Architecture and Everyday Life: *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* (2019)

*Houses remember and haunt as they animate the memories of previous inhabitants, memories that become embodied by the houses and the current dwellers. Houses also embody histories of design, reflective or broader social attitudes toward intimate places* (Davidson 2009: 332).

### 5.1 Uninhabited: The Prefabricated Wooden House

For some time now, mass-produced wooden houses have been receiving increased attention as a possible key to creating affordable housing. Timber is also seen as a sustainable building material of the future, especially in view of climate change. In the United States, the rise of prefabricated wooden homes as a path to affordable housing dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and experienced a major boom due to the new possibilities of industrial manufacturing, particularly after World War I and as a result of the Great Depression in 1929. In 1919, the Ford Motor Company produced a nine-minute documentary film titled *Home Made – A Story of Ready-made House Building*, released by Goldwyn, in which the dream of home ownership in a serially manufactured wooden house was visually staged. Buster Keaton quickly recognized the material for a parody and released his self-produced silent film *One Week/Honeymoon in a Prefabricated House* only one year later, in 1920.<sup>46</sup> In the short film, the uncle gifts his nephew (Buster Keaton) a wooden prefabricated house set for his wedding. However, a jealous rival messes up the numbering on the components, so that the already laborious process of putting them together faces many additional challenges. Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> turns out to be an unlucky day

---

46 The film can be watched online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd6ddOlbKp8> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

for the newlyweds, as their warped prefabricated house is barely able to withstand the rising storm and is running full of water. When a notice arrives informing the couple that they have erected their prefabricated house on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, they try to transport it to the other side by car, but the house gets caught on the railroad tracks. A few seconds later, a train coming from the opposite direction thunders through the prefabricated house, ending the young couple's dream of owning their own home after just one week. This penultimate scene from *One Week* also ends the 32-minute autobiographical documentary *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* directed by Mumbai-based architect and filmmaker Rohan Shivkumar (2019, PSBT India, Cinematographer and Associate Director: Avijit Mukul Kishore).

How does a newly built housing estate become a home for a family and its members?

How do its architecture and design shape the family and neighborhood relationships as well as forms of living together, and consequently also the biography of the residents – even long after they have left this home?

Rohan Shivkumar's remarkable and complex documentary film examines these questions using the example of the LIC Colony designed by Charles Correa in Borivali (also: Borivli), one of the city districts in northwest Mumbai (see also the section on Charles Correa's FDI documentary *City in the Water* in chapter 2). In 1974, as a young boy, he moved into an apartment complex there, which was completed at the beginning of the 1970s with the title name 'Lovely Villa'. As Shivkumar himself describes, the kaleidoscopic film follows four lines of vision, each with a distinct visual language and voice, and each with its own interesting sound. First, there is the "detached conceptual voice", through which large abstract ideas are introduced and historically classified. Perhaps not coincidentally, this detached voice is reminiscent, in terms of film sound history, of the supposedly 'objective' narrative voice that was characteristic of the way in which the Films Division of India's (FDI) state-initiated or state-sponsored documentaries were conceived for the post-Independence era, prior to the advent of video technology and subsequent pluralization of existing documentary practices in the 1980s and 90s (see Gadihoke 2012 and Battaglia 2014). The state's vision of 'home' and of communal living in a post-Independence state, on the basis of which architects and designers conceived and realized their buildings, is described in this first voice. In addition to contemporary film recordings, it is visualized by footage from different archives such as that of the Films Division of India (FDI) or the Charles Correa Foundation.

The 'second voice' in the film explains the physical form of the colony itself and how individual architectural details shape everyday life within it. A third, at times nostalgic and occasionally ironic view / voice illuminates and describes the 'inner life' inside the houses – the development of individual identities and relationships in

the family over the years during which the siblings – Rohan Shivkumar and his sister Sonal Sundararajan, who like himself is an architect too, – grew up in this ‘Lovely Villa’. Finally, the fourth voice and perspective, which is directed at understanding personal feelings, remembering and longing, is deliberately kept fragmentary and vaguely hints at traumatic experiences, personal fears and losses. Here, *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* is strongly reminiscent of documentary film practices that Michael Renov has explored and discussed under the term domestic ethnography.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the significance of the photographic family album becomes more prominent on this level. In the sense of the “acts of memory and imagination” described by Annette Kuhn in her book titled *Family Secrets* (2002), these acts, as well as the presence of the camera itself, provide the siblings with the occasion and “catalyst” for their (family) memory work. As Kuhn explains,

(p)ersonal photos have a particular, and very special, place in the production of memories about our own lives. (...) As part of a vast industry devoted largely to the cultivation of ideal images of the family, family photography constrains our remembering, tries to funnel our memories into particular channels. But it also has more subversive potential. It is possible to take a critical and questioning look at family photographs, and this can generate hitherto unsuspected, sometimes painful, knowledge as well as new understandings about the past and the present, helping to raise critical consciousness not only about our individual lives and our own families, but about ‘the family’ in general and even, too, about the times and the places we inhabit (Kuhn 2002: 152 f.).

As Michaela Schäuble analyzes on the basis of her own film practice in her insightful article “Familien Filme(n)” (*Family Films/Filming Family*, the article was published in German), the medium of film, or more precisely the camera

---

47 As Renov explains, his interest is in work “being made by independent film and video makers that suggests itself – at least to me – as yet another response to the ethnographic impasse. If indeed participant observation founders in its tacking between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, a passage that restages the subject/object dichotomization installed in the post-Enlightenment West, the films and tapes that I term *domestic ethnography* play at the boundaries of inside and outside in a unique way. (...) But domestic ethnography is more than simply another variant of autobiographical discourse, given its explicitly outward gaze; nominally, at least, this mode of documentation takes as its object the father, mother, grandparent, child, or sibling who is genetically linked to the authorial subject. Care must be taken in defining the particular relations that obtain between the domestic ethnographer and her subject (...) In a limited way, domestic ethnography occasions a kind of intersubjective reciprocity in which the representations of self and other are simultaneously if unequally at stake” (Renov 2004: 218 f.). Michael Renov (2004). *The Subject of Documentary*. University of Minnesota Press. Chap. 14: Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the “Other” Self. 216–229.

itself, “not infrequently becomes an instrument that is able to sound out closeness and distance, to track down the past and to potentially reveal what has been kept secret” in the genre of the (auto-)biographical family film. Family films, however, are capable of telling far more than just the story of one’s own or a single family. Schäuble explains that “family relationships, fates, and constellations allow a direct and undisguised insight into the sociopolitical backgrounds and social structures within which they take place” (Schäuble 2015: 348).

In the film *Lovely Villa*, this active process and desire for a conscious confrontation with the past, and what, at the same time, continues to be ‘ghostly’ present in their lives, is expressed particularly impressively through the joint poetic reflection and times when the two siblings Rohan Shivkumar and Sonal Sundararajan speak together, sometimes even synchronously.

Asked about the connection between this film and the previous explorative documentary *Nostalgia for the Future* (2017, jointly directed by Avijit Mukul Kishore and Rohan Shivkumar), which explored the interlinkages of an imagined Indian modernity, the making of a new citizen after Independence and the architecture of the home, Shivkumar responded in an interview that he considered *Lovely Villa* as a culmination of many of the ideas that Avijit Mukul Kishore and he have been interested in in some of their other jointly produced work. They were both interested in exploring the nature of Indian modernity within their respective disciplines, Kishore as a filmmaker and Shivkumar as an architect (Ramnath 2019). To some extent, *Lovely Villa* can also be seen as a follow-up to their film *Nostalgia for the Future* (2017) which was interested in exploring modernity, the idea of citizenship and the architecture of homes that were built to “clothe this ideal citizen”. *Lovely Villa* was the logical extension of that interest, as Shivkumar explains in the same interview (ibid.).

In the following, I would like to take a closer look at the film *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* on the basis of the four ‘lenses’ or voices / perspectives mentioned by Rohan Shivkumar.

## **5.2 Affordable Housing for the ‘Old’ Middle Class: The State’s Vision of the Home and Neighborly Coexistence in Post-Independence India**

From minute 03:34, the male narrative voice first reports how the first village-like settlement (Bombahen) emerged around the river in the middle of the forest area and later, cave temples and monasteries were added along the water, followed by a church and school. “Soon this was the city or at least the outskirts of one. A place to house refugees after the partition. Around these was imagined a new town and like every new town, it was meant to be perfect” (03:52 min). The theme



**Fig. 6.** Still from the film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* (dir. Rohan Shivkumar, 2019).

of housing refugees from the area of present-day Pakistan in this forest-dominated area (Borivali, also: Borivli) is taken up again from minute 14:52 in *Lovely Villa* (see figure 6). We see and hear that the refugees were housed in low-rise barrack-like structures, some of which are abandoned nowadays, but others were later converted into apartments. “How does one make a home – or rather, how does one leave one?” asks the narrative voice in minute 15:11. In cases where residents were able to bring their furniture from their old homes, they tried to arrange it in the same way in the residential barracks, thereby reproducing their old living environment, the “home” in the new place. However, this could hardly succeed, so that “the older home spilled out of the shell of the new one. Eccentric, disturbing” (15:28 min).

How exactly there, in the middle of the mango grove, a new neighborly community was to emerge a few years later, which at the same time was a miniature image of the envisaged unity in diversity in post-colonial India, is a question to which the film refers from minute 04:00 onwards, and for this part, it also includes very interesting excerpts from state film archives.

First, a port and industrial facilities from Bombay are shown, followed shortly by a strikingly long building called Yogakshema at Nariman Point which was the newly built headquarter of the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), founded in 1956 (the same year of India’s second Five Year Plan that focused on industry). The government insurance sector was seen as an integral part of the post-independence nation-building program, providing loans for large-scale infrastructure projects and housing projects throughout India. Within this framework of township projects and government housing schemes, Charles Correa was

engaged as architect for a large residential colony built for policy holders of LIC in 1970 (“Own Your Home”, 05:00 min).<sup>48</sup>

While we see and hear the director (Rohan Shivkumar) guiding an international group of students through this residential colony, where he grew up from 1974, we also learn that a cross-section of the ‘old’ Indian middle class of the 1970s was deliberately supposed to live together here (07:27 min), and this referred not only to occupational groups, but also to regional origins and religious affiliation:

As we see the last names, you will realize that they all come from very different sorts of backgrounds – which is rare. In this building while I was growing up there was a wide variety of different sorts of religion and castes, because of the nature in which they were distributed (*Lovely Villa*, 07:34 min).

Who exactly these people were, who formed this cross-section of the middle class at that time, and how they were able to find their new home in this model housing estate of the LIC in Borivali, is explained in more detail later in the film, when the white-collar immigration to Bombay is mentioned (from minute 14:15). Archival footage of an arriving train is shown in this scene, from which commuters hurriedly disembark and move quickly towards the exit, at first mainly men, followed by significantly fewer women wearing saris.

They came from all over the country – Tamil Nadu, UP, Kerala, Punjab. Accountants in banks, housewives married into the city. Small businessmen who set up shops near railway stations, peons in offices at Churchgate. Bombay was the promise. The insurance policy, their foothold. Their home (14:38 min).

Accordingly, the names of the residential buildings were not oriented towards an origin or past history (as would perhaps be the case today), but towards the promise of a good future for their inhabitants – and, metaphorically, of the post-colonial nation itself: *Lovely Villa*, *Jolly Jeevan*, *Gay Life*. Today, however, hardly any residents remember these names themselves, “nice, secular names though they are” (07:14 min). Rather, the only thing that remains in memory is the number painted on the houses, such as A-6/16, C/24, etc. – “the neatly ordered index that catalogues us all” (07:20 min).

---

48 Arguably much more famous is another LIC housing complex designed by architect B. V. Doshi in Ahmedabad, better known as Bimanagar. Considered as a model example of low-cost housing which allow inhabitants to modify and transform the space according to their ideas and needs, for instance, through incremental growth, Doshi’s work for the LIC continues to be discussed by architects who are interested in finding solutions for the ongoing shortage in affordable housing. Doshi’s LIC housing project was also among the works exhibited at Vitra Design Museum in an international retrospective titled *Balkrishna Doshi: Architecture for the People* (2019).

As one such “archetypical modern Indian citizen”, the voice of the sister introduces the father in minute 12:26 min when she explains:

Our home was always tech-savvy. It must have been because both my mother and my father were engineers. My father was the archetypical modern Indian citizen. He was born in the 1940. He studied at IIT Madras and IISc Bangalore. The state's temples of science and technology before working at the TIFR in Mumbai.<sup>49</sup> This is where he met my mother (12:41 min).

The aspect of secularism comes to the fore once again later in the film, when Rohan Shivkumar recalls how, as a 13-year-old boy, he heard about the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on the television news. The family had purchased the color TV in 1982 to be able to follow the broadcast of the Delhi Asian Games live that year – the centrally planned, national media event formed the starting point for the so-called “color TV revolution” in India. Shivkumar recalls a Sikh family taking shelter in the home of neighbors for some time during the anti-Sikh pogroms following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and mentions in this context (17:28 min):

Refugees that found safety in the relatively secular nature of this state-built housing colony. This was also perhaps the reason my friends Zubair and Amjad found it to be the only shelter when their neighbourhoods burnt in the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992 and 93.

Shivkumar dedicates his film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* in the credits to his father D. Sundararajan (1942–2014) as well as to his ‘architectural father’ Charles Correa (1930–2015). In terms of a third formative ‘father figure’, the paternalistic post-colonial state and envisioned social order, especially as it was embodied by Jawaharlal Nehru, can be effortlessly identified in this (auto)biographical film. Insofar as secularity is not necessarily regarded as the absence of religion, but rather in a sense of mutual acceptance and recognition of respective identities, it seems that Shivkumar sees in it a principle which can be critically

---

49 The Tata Institute for Fundamental Research (TIFR) was founded in June 1945. On the homepage of the TIFR you can read: “TIFR is a National Centre of the Government of India, under the umbrella of the Department of Atomic Energy, as well as a deemed University awarding degrees for master's and doctoral programs. The Institute was founded in 1945 with support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust under the vision of Dr. Homi Bhabha. At TIFR, we carry out basic research in physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, computer science and science education. Our main campus is located in Mumbai, with centres at Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad.” Under the section “History and Vision,” Homi J. Bhabha is quoted as saying: “It is the duty of people like us to stay in our own country and build up outstanding schools of research such as some other countries are fortunate to possess.”

reflected and ironically commented on but should not be abandoned in India as the best possible guarantor of respectful and peaceful coexistence in difference (on the aspect of visual secularity, see also Schneider 2020).

### **5.3 Design for Living Together: The Importance of Architecture in Everyday Life**

Reflecting on the beginnings in his own architectural studies, Rohan Shivkumar recognizes the defining influences of the housing estate in which he grew up (07:57 min). He ponders on the influence of key elements in Charles Correa's architecture on his own early drawings and designs:

I recognize the scales, terraces – windows, doors as a vocabulary learnt by imitation (08:04 min). A vocabulary learnt by experience. My vision of the ideal life was the one that I had lived. In the design of the colony, you can see many of the concepts that shaped Correa's imagination for ideal living (09:04 min).

From a bird's eye view, it is first apparent that the lanes lead inwards ending at the edge of the forest. The front of the residential buildings adjoins these lanes, the gardens are located on the rear side. Terraces cascade down to the gardens, which merge into the adjacent forest. Dead-end streets prevent the forest from being overly encroached upon by vehicular traffic. The large-scale terraces, open to the sky, celebrate Correa's named principle of 'blessings of the sky', while the large openings on both sides of the tubular apartments allow their cross ventilation. The apartments have different sizes, which was supposed to guarantee a "healthy mix of different classes living in the same building" (09:21 min). The step that separates the entrance to the apartments from the front door may not be a very prominent detail in the design, but it has an important function in neighborhood life, and in the director's photographic memory it did in any case, as neighbors could sit on it and talk to each other. The interior design is functional and simple, and the doors and windows were largely made of wood instead of glass for cost reasons – "after all, this was meant to be affordable housing" (09:51 min).

Courtyards, as spaces of encounter, were often prominent in Correa's designs, as in this LIC housing development in Borivali. Parallel to the staircases of each house is a pedestrian path that connects the street with the gardens at the back of the houses. All the footpaths were connected through the gardens and courtyards of the settlement, so that residents could reach the residential houses without having to cross the main road. Children were thus able to make friends in all directions of the settlement (10:52 min), but this is no longer as easy today, as many of these shortcuts have now been closed off for (perceived or real) safety concerns. In order to increase the available living space, some of the generous terraces were also reduced in size.



## 5.4 “The home is the witness, and no witness is mute”

Until minute 03:29, the sound of the raga Malkauns introduces us to the film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography*, while the camera moves over the surrounding forest, captures the beginning of everyday life in the LIC Colony, shows some of the now empty buildings from the barracks which had been built after the Partition for refugees from Pakistan. We see director Rohan Shivkumar with his group of students on a guided tour through the housing estate, sense the evening atmosphere, the view of the striking terraces, of plants, trees, branches, blossoms – right in the first minutes, we are sensitized to the fact that living together cannot and should not only be related to humans alone, but also includes plants and animals from an interspecies perspective. In some of his interviews, Shivkumar also mentioned the now significantly decimated number of wild animals that lived in the LIC colony during his childhood and youth.

Tonya Davidson’s short quote at the beginning of this chapter helps us understand that the apartment building in *Lovely Villa* embodies memories that are ‘curated’ in a visual and sound filmic archive: on the one hand, the memory of the histories of design, the state and societal attitudes towards housing and family life therein, including the perceptible or fixed gender roles and relationships between parents and children inscribed therein. On the other hand, a memory of the intimacy of shared life, of certain ways of living, and of all the practices and routines that made this house a home for its inhabitants, is also preserved and curated. Unlike in the case of a home which was destroyed or lost through flight or migration, the dwellings in *Lovely Villa* continue to be materially present – both the now vacant barracks built for refugees from Pakistan in the course of the Partition history and the titular ‘Lovely Villas’ which continue to be inhabited but have changed in appearance. So how can this ‘witness’ who is never ‘silent’ (02:03 min) be heard, or, in other words, how do we as the audience access this embodied memory knowledge?

As Davidson writes:

Memories of intimacy, legacy of strangers, and memories of distant ways of life are all imbued in and reflected by domestic architecture. These house-bound memories are accessed both through the houses’ materiality and how houses are imagined in the intangibilities of memory (Davidson 2009: 334).

In this sense, access is made possible for us as viewers and listeners through the dialogical space that the siblings create with their conscious memory and curative work, and they include the architecture, as a ‘speaking storage medium’ for the different levels of personal, family and social memory, just as naturally as the family’s photo albums as well as film footage, video and sound recordings are included. It is interesting to ponder about the moments and images from a family

life rich in memories within their apartment in this 'Lovely Villa' that were chosen for this documentary film, which at just over 30 minutes is quite short and yet very dense and layered.

First, the relationship of the siblings to their deceased father, his ghostly presence in the apartment after his death, as well as the implied occasional irritations and ambivalent feelings caused by his seemingly eccentric personality.

Second, growing up as children and adolescents in the process of finding their own personal, also gender and sexual, identities in the midst of a period of upheaval in post-Independence society, which extended from the Nehru era through the period of the state of emergency (1975–77) and into the transitional period of the 1980s (Rajagopal 2011), finally culminating in the economic liberalization and rise of identity-based politics.

Those were the times of Russian ballet dancers and evil Americans. Of the trickling images of elsewhere worlds. Of lines at ration shops. Of repression and the dream of freedom. Of evenings on the stoops of buildings. Of adolescence and innocence (06:18 min).

[18:34 min] There we were, trying to be men. Our frontier to the south was the railway station that we sometimes walked barefoot to. (...) [19:36 min] On most evenings, we would walk to the edge of the city with the thick stench of the creek and the dank green of the mangroves (...) [19:49 min] My arm around his shoulders, friends and lovers.

And finally, the sound archive, which in the words of the sister, Sonal Sundararajan, has also inscribed itself in the memory of the house/home when she says (23:35 min): "These walls have collected songs as residue. Songs off-key, off beat. Lyrics mangled beyond comprehension". Music and singing took place in the context of family gatherings and one of the terraces of the house had been specially converted into a music room. Classical Indian music and Hindi film songs were as much a part of the family's sound archive and repertoire as the stars of global pop music at the time (Michael Jackson, Madonna, A-ha, among others), as the many posters on the walls of the young people's rooms suggest. The whistling and the sound of the father's voice, still so present, whose words were not always accessible or understandable for his children, are also part of this sound memory. His death left the survivors with a palpable feeling of emptiness and 'unhomeliness' inside their home: "Alone, I felt his ghost rise and speak to me" (24:35 min).

Reflecting on ghosts, Tonya Davidson writes: "Ghosts offer up and make available pasts to be reconciled with, and in their communicative insistence, ghosts demand remembrance. They draw us affectively and mysteriously in relation with other

times and people” (Davidson 2009: 334). Hence, they compel us to remember, but they also “produce the places” to which they belong (ibid.: 335).<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the late father of the director Rohan Shivkumar and his sister Sonal Sundararajan, this place-bound, spirit-like “communicative insistence”, as Davidson calls it, and desire to be remembered can of course also be related to the architect Charles Correa as well as to the planning perspective of a post-colonial state. As Rahul Mehrotra describes, the period from the 1950s through to the 1970s was characterized by the idea that architects could shape the form not only of the physical environment but also social life: “Modernists’ ideas, and the optimism of reconstructing society through the re-orchestration of the built environment pervaded the debate in India” (Mehrotra 2011: 30). While the sphere of the architect in India has shrunk significantly since the 1980s, and in particular since the 1990s, the first three decades after Independence were marked by a considerable expansion, through the building of both physical and social infrastructure (ibid.). The state’s ideas of a social order and way of life for its ‘ideal citizens’ are expressed in an exemplary manner in the housing architecture and vision of living together in the LIC Colony, and through this architecture, it also shapes the lives and feelings of its inhabitants. Therefore, by necessity, the filmic method of domestic ethnography and visual (auto)biography not only centers on the family members but has to be expanded to the architecture itself.

---

50 As the article titled “How To Live with a Ghost”, by Anna Kodé, published on Oct 26, 2022 in *The New York Times* mentions, a recent study “from the Utah-based home security company Vivint found that nearly half of the thousand surveyed homeowners believed that their house was haunted. Another survey of 1,000 people by Real Estate Witch, an education platform for home buyers and sellers, found similar results, with 44 percent of respondents saying that they’ve lived in a haunted house. (...) With so many people believing that they live with ghosts, a new question arises: How *does* one live with ghosts?” Interestingly, however, and perhaps in stark contrasts to what many stories and films may suggest, the article quotes persons who don’t experience cohabiting with a spirit as a fearful experience but seem to enjoy it or, “at least have learned how to live with it”, just as they would need to learn to “coexist harmoniously” with roommates. Online available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/26/realestate/haunted-house-paranormal-ghosts.html> (last access Jan 3, 2024).