



Feeling at home 感覺像家



ROOMS IN A HOUSE

Home is an abstract concept easily exploited by the cheerful marketeers of B&Q, Ikea and Working House, all offering the chance to make your house 'home'. As Taiwan upgrades and matures, accepting that the island is not just a temporary home, the reveal-all strip lights, bare walls and wooden sofas of the typical residence, vestiges of a practical work-and-save ethic, are fast being discarded for aesthetically pleasing toilet brushes and good-idea-at-the-time candle snuffers.

Whereas once a Taiwanese family, perhaps uniquely, could enjoy a solitary piece of splendid furniture in an otherwise stark environ, the overall scheme of home has started to become important. Sundays are now filled with "Yes, dear, but we have binglang red in the bathroom already, and on the car door, let's try something else in the bedroom." In a city which seems at a glance to be made of replicated grey veneers, inside-out all-weather tiled monstrosities and held-together-by-a-plastic-tie shelters, the need to individualise homes is that much more important. From the outside, they almost all almost look the same.

FEELING AT HOME

Is the place you grew up in the place you call home? Or is that the place you live now? Perhaps they are one and the same. Perhaps home is a place you are yet to live. We move, ourselves and our stuff, realigning, redefining our home. Some people seem to move an inordinate number of times. An ex of mine, as a child, had a mother who often moved them around to the new, soon to be old, homes of her fast growing list of boyfriends. He'd be woken in the morning and told to pack, as it was again moving day. This childhood roundabout gifted him with the skill of comfort - within three hours of inhabiting a new place, the things that made him feel 'home' would be arranged, creating his safety zone - which made me feel better about kicking him out.

This is the reality of home, that feeling, the element never quite captured on the telly where things are generally orderly, troubles are sorted quickly, and there is rarely an argument whether the toilet lid should be up or down. Home is that most personal, sacred, inviolate place, that place of safety away from the dangers and noise of the street, where you can talk to yourself, answer the phone and chat in the nude, safe to pee with the door open, to choose the music you listen to -- to be the private persona. It's why we wonder when meeting an interesting new person what their home is like, for a it is a mental excursion into the walls of their private self.

These walls that define our homes can harbour good feelings or ill. If the feelings are bad, we take refuge, in the homes of others or the streets - places where the lack of privacy means there is no sense of 'home'. Even for those who live like this, in ways many of us cannot fathom, there are things that make the feeling of 'safe'. The bag lady with her shopping trolley full of - what? The old man with the blanket wrapping - what? We don't know. But they have found their small private place, away from our eyes.