



Construction

- 1: First, fold each sheet in half along the vertical axis.
- 2: Using a craft knife or scalpel, cut a horizontal slot along the centre dotted line of the first sheet. (pages 1/2/11/12)
- 3: Then cut along the dotted lines on all the other sheets. Make sure to cut to the very edges of the paper.
- 4: Stack the folded sheets in ascending order with the even numbers at the top. Curl the bottom half of the second page (pages 3/4/19/20).
- 5: Thread the curled page through the centre slot of the first page. Repeat this process with the third (pages 5/6/17/18), fourth (pages 7/8/15/16) and fifth sheet (pages 9/10/13/14) with the even pages in ascending order.
- 6: When all the pages have been threaded through, check the pagination. Finally, fold the booklets in half along the horizontal axis.

the back garden. This backs on to the gardens of some houses in a neighbouring street, a few doors along from which live a couple who came round once, to ask if we knew who owns the overgrown wilderness which backs onto their garden, which is the fenced-off gardens of a pair of large dilapidated houses, formerly a 'hotel', owned by one of the neighbourhood's more notorious and insolent slum landlords, one of several who have, in recent years, rapidly expanded their unrestrained, super-profitable exploitation of the public sector's inability to cope with its responsibilities towards the increasing number of people in the city who find themselves in desperate housing circumstances. Before explaining this, I felt it necessary to say that if they had seen me looking out of the window through binoculars in the direction of their house, I had been looking, not at them, but at the birds in our garden, in which we are extremely interested, and which have from time to time included goldcrests, blackcaps, goldfinches, long-tailed tits and, unhappily, a sparrowhawk. They said that they too sometimes watched the birds through binoculars, and he left his card, illustrated with an image of a pen and a bottle of ink, from which I inferred he was a writer. About eighteen months later, I came across a large pile of books in Tesco, in the high street, in which were several copies of his latest 601 page novel, published by Hodder, 2 for £5.99. Opposite Tesco are the corner-shop premises of an even more aggressive private landlord. The floor level behind the counter is raised, and cars are parked in the narrow space between the pavement and the shop windows, as if those inside were expecting ram-raiders.

All I have to show for the last couple of years are a collection of essays like this one, and a television documentary⁴ which is, so far, the only realised fragment of the previously imagined project. Five years after embarking on this, after a second UK election during which housing was scarcely mentioned,

THE ROBINSON INSTITUTE PATRICK KEILLER

I spend most of my waking life working in a room on the first floor overlooking Several years later, we live in a more spacious house, built in 1902, in which

more generous ready-to-wear dwelling; new or second-hand. as a by-product of the production, but would move, in the meantime, to a put this, which seemed extremely unlikely, we might subsequently acquire it likely, an established *avant garde* architect. If we could find somewhere to traumas that accompany house-building, in real life) either by me or, more avoiding the need to secure planning permission and the various other might include the realisation of a *concept* house, designed (as a film set, manuscript), I imagined a project in which the production of a film who wants to build a house has the feeling that he is entombing himself in a slow, too psychologically risky, as Nietzsche remarks, "a truly modern person decades, we set aside the idea of building a *house of the future* to live in (too Having briefly reconsidered it, as at similar moments during the preceding

found only in films. afflicted people who give too much of their attention to a quality of space and our children the victims of a neglect of actual space that frequently and piles of film cans, overcrowded, poorly decorated and furnished, my lover *Robinson* film, and returned to a house full of half-unpacked cardboard boxes they can be neither replaced nor adequately maintained? I finished the began to wonder, will become of the millions of ageing dwellings in the UK, if maintain, repair and improve existing owner-occupied dwellings. What I years) and had detailed the extraordinarily inadequate of the industries that UK (implying a future lifespan for the average house of several thousand attention to the very low rate at which dwellings were being replaced in the I read a study, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which had drawn

difference to the apparently marginal character of much everyday experience, technology, especially mobile communications technology, would make any I had wondered whether the increasing scope and availability of new

and still appears, to be in very poor condition. housing, in particular, especially privately rented housing, appeared, increasingly problematic, and in a variety of other ways. A large proportion of economy make small scale maintenance and repair of ordinary buildings example; from physical dilapidation and decay, as trends in the wider suffering a general decline: in the disempowerment of local government, for spaces, at least in the UK, then appeared, as they still appear, to be modern – the airport, the office tower, the big museum and so on. Local compared with other spaces that might be thought typically modern, or post-home, the high street and so on – were becoming more marginal in character, of space might change as a result of one's connection to the internet. For a long time, it had seemed that the spaces of everyday surroundings. I can remember, a few years ago, trying to imagine how subjective experience

increasingly attracted to the idea of time-travel? stranded, shipwrecked almost, in our own present, and are we therefore we, perhaps, become more sensitive to the fact that we are inescapably has become easier to move around in and communicate across space, have sometimes seem nearer than yesterday morning in one's own kitchen. As it know, in the present, and the present in Nepal, in Tokyo, or on Mars, can large, they don't. Haunting is still relatively unusual. We all live, as far as we reasonably expect our everyday surroundings to feel haunted but, by and by other people, usually people of the more or less distant past. We might Most of us spend much of our time in spaces made and previously occupied



This publication is one of a series of essays commissioned by Probois for the series SPECIES OF SPACES – inspired by and in homage to Georges Perec's eponymous book. The series contemplates how we, in the contemporary world of the twenty-first century, occupy space – the virtual and physical, emotional and social or what Perec called the 'intra-ordinary'. SPECIES OF SPACES aims to radically question the trajectory of contemporary urban existence, intervening in current debates on how the virtual and the physical relate to each other, and how technological advances affect cultural and social structures.

Supported by a London Arts Publishing New Writing Award.

This publication is designed to be freely available to download and print out. Under no circumstances should any version of this publication, whether print or electronic, be sold by any third party without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

DIFFUSION ebook design by:
Nima Fatatoori (www.NMDesign.co.uk)
Paul Farrington (www.tonne.org.uk)

ISBN: 1 901540 24 3
British Library Cataloguing-in-publication data:
a catalogue record for this publication is available
at the British Library

© Probois & Patrick Keller
First published by Probois in 2002.
All rights reserved. Free

Series Editor: Giles Lane
www.diffusion.org.uk

THE ROBINSON INSTITUTE
Patrick Keller

especially urban experience. For much of the twentieth century, artists, writers and revolutionaries had attempted to deal with this and similar predicaments by employing more or less explicit strategies to poeticise or otherwise transform experience of everyday surroundings. The Surrealists and their followers were probably the leading exponents of this, and the Surrealist encounter with everyday experience generally involved the cultivation of subjectivities that revealed previously unappreciated value and meanings in ordinary things. The found object, being portable, is the most familiar result of this revelatory process, but the Surrealists also discovered examples of found architecture and found space. Photography, in the most general way, has also offered similar transformations since its invention. In life, this kind of experiential change, which sometimes involves a heightened awareness of events and appearances not unlike that produced by certain drugs, is (in the absence of continuous revolution) generally ephemeral. As Henri Lefebvre wrote: "the space which contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as prohibits what those preconditions make possible", but in art, literature, cinema and so on, such glimpses, conventionally experienced in isolation, or perhaps with another or others to whom one is very close, can be reconstituted and shared with a suitably receptive viewer, reader or audience. Edgar Allan Poe's story, *The Man of the Crowd*, offers an early prototype for this kind of modernist *flâneur* text, and was written at about the time when the modern paradox of visibility and isolation – the convention of silence in public between strangers – was beginning to dominate in cities such as Paris and London.

In the early 1990s, it had seemed to me that the growth of virtual space, and the migration into it of all kinds of economic activity, would speed the decline of some kinds of actual, public space. The closing of bank premises was

1. During the same period, a large number of bars were bought by banks – in March 2001, the Japanese investment bank Nomura owned 5,585 pubs in the UK, and it was announced that Morgan Grenfell (a subsidiary of Deutsche Bank) had bought Whitbread's estate of 2,998.
2. *Robinson in Space* (82mins, 35mm, 1997, BBC films).
3. This was a Whitbread Travel Inn at Orrell, near Wigan, a couple of hundred yards from junction 26 of the M6 motorway.
4. *The Diapidated Dwelling* (78mins, beta sx, 2000, Channel Four Television).

Notes

By the mid-90s however, it appeared that this new aridity, while it undoubtedly existed, was not all that widespread. I had noticed that our local high street, for example, despite its increasing dilapidation, was a site of still-flourishing economic activity and increasingly visible global connectedness. The newsagent's window displayed cards offering cut-price telephone deals to many distant territories. Other shops offered cheap flights, both to emigrant and tourist destinations. New 'ethnic' restaurants and shops were opening all the time, most recently (then) a Russian delicatessen. It also turned out to be the *locale* of an internationally successful pop-group. In many ways, this local, physically decaying space was more pervasively and successfully *globally* than the average airport, and certainly much more so than the nearby business park, built on what was previously the site of a car factory, and owned by the property development

sometimes referred to as an example of this trend, banking activities being increasingly conducted via cash machines, and by post or telephone. With only slight exaggeration, one could imagine that in some kinds of public space – the less frequented streets of the City of London, say – the sense of their being conventionally public places had all but disappeared, there being so few people about outdoors: while indoors, people were more likely to be peering into the virtual space of their computer screens than looking out of the window. These exterior spaces seemed to be developing something of the feel of other kinds of space that, while not inaccessible, are largely hidden from view – the space behind a television, perhaps, or on top of a wardrobe. In the rural landscape, too, there was a similar quality. With a bit of effort, one could imagine that parts of it were as unexperienced as if they were merely access space for the maintenance engineers of mobile telephone networks.

subsidiary of British Aerospace, which I had been previously inclined to read as a typical spatial outcome of the contemporary economy, and was certainly characterised by the *aridity* previously identified, despite its electric fountains.

Perhaps the condition of the local was beginning to evolve in a different, more positive way. Perhaps we were on the verge of a new, electronic *flânerie*, in which experience of place was enhanced by the possibility of immediate connection, via the virtual realm, to people, both friends and strangers, in other places. Perhaps the era of *visibility and isolation*, of silence between strangers in public, was coming to an end. Perhaps these new predicaments would give rise to a kind of radical subjectivity, which might even be less ephemeral than those of the Surrealists, the Situationists or their latterday adherents, and would somehow install itself in the street, transcending its marginality and dilapidation. For some reason, I first encountered these thoughts while riding a bicycle. For a week or so afterwards, I experienced a mild e-euphoria, a quasi-surrealist *frisson*, though when I finally got round to signing up with Demon (then a leading provider), this soon disappeared. A few years later, however, many of the former banks which briefly exemplified the evacuation of economic activity from the high street have reopened as bars¹, and in most of them there are people talking on mobile phones. A kind of electronic *flânerie* has arrived, though, as with so many predicted phenomena, not in quite the way it was anticipated.

One of the internet's most intriguing capabilities, for a topographical filmmaker, was that it offered contemporaneous views of distant landscapes. During 1996, I had heard that there were websites where one could access the cameras that observe traffic on UK motorways, and immediately conceived a strong desire to explore, and perhaps to sample, what I imagined

much as people used to predict it would. The way we experience space now changes much faster than the fabric of the spaces that we occupy. When looking at images of the past, I have been increasingly struck by the contrast between the familiarity of the spaces depicted, and our distance from the lives of those who then inhabited them. The ease with which we now communicate with distant spaces in the present may be a factor in this, but there is another reason, which is that the medium of film, too, has become old. The virtual past exists in many media – in the topography of novels, like *Break House*, in maps, paintings, photographs and so on – but film's *duration*, and its onerous aspect, suggests analogies with consciousness, with lived experience. At the same time, film provokes seemingly unanswerable questions about the inner life of its human subjects in a way that the novel, for instance, does not – novelists enjoying access to the thoughts of their creations. Perhaps such questions are unanswerable, but perhaps, with the aid of literature and other sources, one can make the attempt. Time travel may not yet be an actual possibility, but it has long been a virtual one.

would be a large and increasing number of real-time moving images of landscapes throughout the world. I wondered if perhaps, one day, I might be able to make a film without having to leave the house. In fact, at the time, there seemed to be hardly any real-time outdoor web cameras operating anywhere in the world: most of the topographical camera sites only offered a still, updated daily or perhaps hourly, or not at all, but somehow the scarcity of this imagery, its poor resolution, and the way that the images tickled, very slowly, into the monochrome screen of my already obsolete *PowerBook* made it all the more attractive. In the house in which we then lived, the telephone socket was in the kitchen, and I used to let the pictures load while I was doing the washing up. I never found any views of UK motorways. The first site I came across that offered anything approaching real-time moving pictures was that of a company called *Actual Size Internet Solutions*, in Essex. This showed a fresh still every two or three seconds, and was particularly impressive at night, when occasional figures passing along the pavement suggested an Essex *noir*. The site became briefly newsworthy when it was revealed that the Neuhoft family, formerly of New Mexico, had moved to Colchester as a result of having seen it, attracted by the apparent absence of crime. They were not, they said, disappointed by the reality of the town, despite its garrison of 4,000 soldiers, and streets patrolled by military police. Another early favourite was a camera at Mawson Station, an Australian research base in Antarctica. To begin with, this was a single image of the station, updated every hour. If it was dark, as it often was, the screen was black. If it was daylight, with a blizzard, it was white or grey. At other times, there was a view of huts, sometimes illuminated. It didn't occur to me at the

Street is that above the entry to Newman Mews, which connects, via Newman Passage, a narrower archway adjacent to the Newman Arms, to Rathbone Street. On the north side of the Newman Street archway is a house which is perhaps not quite big enough to have contained Turveydrop's Academy, and is no longer dingy, being the premises of *Ciné-Contact*, where we were editing the film.

This encounter with its fictional past recalled a whole series of fateful associations with this corner of London, better known for its role in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*. A few doors along Rathbone Street are the former premises of the British Film Institute's now disbanded production division, where I spent months editing *London* with Larry Sider, with whom I was again working, and wrote the narration which had led me to acquire *Bleak House*. The first press interview prior to *London's* release took place at a table outside the Newman Arms. *Ciné-Contact's* move to Newman Street had been the catalyst for the producer of my two previous films, who used to sub-let a corner of their previous office, to join *Illuminations* (whose office had once been in Newman Mews) the company for which we were making the film, which was how I ended up with two producers, which was why, eventually, I read *Bleak House*. The discovery of Mr Turveydrop's Academy, in the small hours of a sleepless January night, brought all this vividly to mind. *Bleak House* is set, approximately, in the 1830s. We finished editing the film in a room which looked onto the backs of some of the original houses in Rathbone Street, which now appeared, in a way they had never done before, to offer the possibility of contact with another time.

In the last 150 years or so, technology has radically altered the way we communicate, but the built environment has not changed anything like as

time, but I suspect that part of the attraction of this view was the ease with which one could misconstrue it as a window looking into another time. Mawson Station is named after Sir Douglas Mawson, whose Australasian Antarctic Expedition took place in the years 1911-14, and the rudimentary monochrome images were not unlike those of polar explorations of the period. They also evoked the *décor* of the Howard Hawks-produced film of 1951, *The Thing from Another World*.

The name of Mawson was familiar as that of the landscape architect who designed Stanley Park, in Blackpool, who is said to have asserted: "Blackpool stands between us and revolution". Stanley Park in Blackpool is named after a member of the family of the Earls of Derby, other members of which have given their names to Stanley Park in Liverpool and Stanley Park in Vancouver (as well as, I imagine, Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, which is not *that* far from Antarctica). I had visited the latter Stanley Park in 1994, in Vancouver for the film festival, and been fascinated by the view from its beach of English Bay, where there are nearly always twelve ships lying at anchor, waiting to enter the port. It is said that if there are fewer than twelve ships in English Bay, people in Vancouver worry. Searching for an image of the bay and its ships I encountered, instead, recorded sounds, one of the park's *9 o'clock gun*, another of a floatplane taking off from the harbour, like one I had photographed when I was there. There were a number of other sites on the Pacific coast – a view, from a first floor window, of the car park of a scientific institution in Alaska; a view of the sea transmitted by a Santa Cruz *fogcam*, and a *baycam* in San Diego, which first offered an image of the bay, then another of the airport – all of which recalled the eeriness of a few jet-lagged days in autumn three years earlier. Once again, more or less contemporaneous views of distant places seemed to bring with them the

One of the strands omitted from the *audiobook* was the story of Caddy Jellyby's engagement and subsequent marriage to Prince Turveydrop, her dancing teacher, the fatally exploited son of old Mr Turveydrop, the proprietor of Turveydrop's Academy, a dancing school in Newman Street, in London, which is described as being 'in a sufficiently dingy house at the corner of an archway', and backs on to a mews. The only remaining archway in Newman

The idea that it might be possible to visit other times, rather than merely other places, first arose during the previously mentioned visits to virtual Antarctica, and was revived during the later lengthy preoccupation with the age and likely future of the built environment. While rewriting the *house* film's narration, in the light of perplexing comment from the *client*, I sometimes entertained *bad thoughts* towards my producers (there were two, which I imagine is never a good idea). I would wake early, often in the middle of the night, and got into the habit of reading Dickens' *Bleak House* to pass the hours until morning. I had not read the book before, but had owned an *audiobook* version, read by Paul Scofield, for several years. I had bought it to prepare for recording the narration of a film, *London*, which Paul was to read by himself, and the tape was extremely helpful. I have since often listened to it on long car journeys. The abridgement is very skilful, as they often are, and the story gains a degree of *montage* beyond that which characterises the original, for, as Eisenstein pointed out, Dickens was a pioneer of *montage*.

so on. In the end, however, I think it is the symptom of a more serious concern not to accumulate images for which I have no immediate use, and

By this time, I had begun work on a film about the present-day predicament of the *house*. This had been under development for some time, and had arisen as a kind of pendant to its predecessor, which had, for reasons I could never quite fathom, largely avoided domestic space. While photographing it, however, my colleague and I had been faced, nearly every night, with the vexed question of where to stay. One night, after a particularly bad experience, we found ourselves in one of a rapidly growing chain of what were, in effect, motels, which had opened during the previous weeks. We were, the receptionist told us, the first people ever to occupy our rooms. These were large, well furnished and equipped, warm and comfortable, with a décor which, while not entirely sympathetic, was a great deal less disconcerting than that of most of the other places we had stayed in. Before going to sleep, I turned on the television, on which there appeared an image

As the months passed, websites generally grew bigger and more cumbersome, the *PowerBook* became more and more ill-suited to these *pioneur* excursions, and I abandoned the habit. A few months later we moved house, and shortly afterwards bought an *iMac*. The telephone point was no longer in the kitchen, the images were colour and much faster to load, and the dish-watery, time-suspended ambience of the previous situation was lost. In any case, no attempting to revisit them, some of the sites had gone, while others had become more extensive and hence, often, less mysterious.

I tried to revisit the site a few days later, I couldn't find it. Presumably the most Hitchcockian of these metaphysical spaces, but when midnight, I came across Camera 58 of the Freeway Management System of the Arizona Department of Transportation, with an image of Phoenix that was suggestion that it was possible to see across time. One night, just after

establishment' in 'a large Edwardian house on the outskirts of a provincial university city' she works in an office overlooking the back garden. At a particularly difficult moment towards the end of editing the film, I decided it was no longer a good idea to expect the production of a television programme to be the sole means of realising a quasi-academic project, and have since become an out-station of an academic institution, with a brief to research 'representational space, and the future of the built environment'.

This semi-fictional reconfiguration of one's dwelling as a *think-tank* might seem an extreme reaction to the marginal predicament of domesticity, but it is not so different to the position of many households for whom the telephone, the computer and so on offer unprecedented levels of connectedness to life outside the house. While portable communication has permitted a kind of *flânerie* outdoors, the effects of electronic virtuality on domestic space seem to be more subtle. If my experience is anything to go by (which it may not be, as there are several alternative explanations) these include a renewed appreciation of ordinary, everyday phenomena. Photography, or the Surrealists' *frisson*, or some drugs, revealed things as *they could be*, but two-way electronic connectedness seems to enrich experience of things as *they are*. This is perhaps partly because, as an individual, one feels less isolated at home, but is also because the virtual spaces of digital communications, unlike those of photography, are not particularly attractive, so that in contrast even the most untidy and unromantically dilapidated interior can sometimes appear with a lucidity approaching that of a Vermeer. Being, in this way, happier at home, I have noticed that in recent years I have become less keen to travel. There are several other possible explanations for this – the difficulty of getting about as a family of five; meanness, following travel paid for by employers etc.; a

of some young people playing music, one of them, seen in close up, on a Fender Stratocaster. Musing on the beauty of this instrument, which I had long considered a key twentieth century artefact, I came to the conclusion that an economy that offers an adolescent the opportunity to own such a guitar, and hence the life-changing possibility of becoming a half-decent imitator of Jimi Hendrix, for less than a couple of hundred pounds (my possibly low estimate of the then-current price of a mass-produced Stratocaster), and that could produce, in the UK, a brand new hotel bedroom of the quality of the one I was then occupying, capable of accommodating a family of five (as we later proved, returning from a day trip to Blackpool) for only £34.50 per night, could not be entirely bad. With this epiphany began a flirtation with consumerism which lasted for a couple of years. What would happen, I thought, if the capabilities of globalised, automated production and distribution, which were held to have made possible what people then sometimes referred to as *the consumer revolution*, could be applied to the production of domestic space, to *housing*?

A couple of years later, the Tories had been swept from office, and the nation was led by a man who not only owns, but apparently plays, a Fender Stratocaster. A few weeks after our night in Wigan, we had stayed in a Forte *Travelodge* – the rival brand – in the future prime minister's Sedgefield constituency, and discovered a brass plaque which recorded that, earlier in the year, he had officiated at its opening. In the following year, Forte were taken over by Granada, whose chief executive, Gerry Robinson, subsequently appointed by the incoming government as chairman of the Arts Council of England, had stated that Forte's brands were 'underpriced'. As a result, perhaps, of Robinson's intervention, the UK's two rival motel chains no longer offer the emancipatory, bargain-price mobility they did in 1995, and

The narrative was only partly autobiographical. It was conceived as the document of a fictional researcher, with the voice of Tilda Swinton, who returns to the UK after twenty years, among a little-known nomadic people of the Arctic, who devote much of their time to the construction of enormous houses made of snow that cost nothing and are frequently rebuilt to investigate the predicament of the house in the United Kingdom for her employer, an unnamed research organisation. Setting up a small research

There are ten interviews in the film, with academics, architects, a manufacturer (the design engineer James Dyson), and the head of research at FDSavills, the international property consultants. Setting these up involved a certain amount of e-mail, in which I explained what the film was supposed to be about, asked preliminary questions, and reconsidered the project in the light of the answers. This was the beginning of life as a *tele-collager*.

There are few signs that any combination of computers, globalised production and consumer pressure is likely to lead to better, cheaper housing. New technology appears to stimulate demand, but does very little to improve supply, as in San Francisco, for example, where the rapid growth of the economy was accompanied by a house price boom. The subsequent bursting of this bubble presumably had the opposite result, so that the overall effect may not only be to inflate prices, but also to increase market turbulence. Meanwhile, the *moment* of consumerism, that inspired my project and its contemporaries, seems to have passed. Instead of the housing market becoming more like a consumer market, some consumer markets have become more like the housing market, as manufacturers (of toys, for instance, or computer games) and others have remembered how to manipulate scarcity.

At the same time, travelling up and down the A40, Western Avenue, in London, I had been struck by the dilapidation of many of its 1930s houses.

The idea that new technology might be about to have some impact on *housing*, that had occurred to me, had also occurred to others. In the spring of 1996, the architectural press reported a number of initiatives by architects and others which set out to encourage reform of the UK's unloved housing building industry, with references to post-war prefabs, Japanese factory built houses, car production, and other industrial technologies. It was not difficult to detect the expectation that such projects might flourish under an incoming Labour government. In other parts of the world, notably Japan and North America, computer aided manufacturing techniques had already been employed, in a variety of ways, in the production of housing. It seemed merely a matter of time before some global corporate initiative began to shake up, or eliminate the UK's house-building industry, either with or without such new technology, in an echo of what had happened to the UK-owned car industry in the early 1970s. There were a number of more or less likely suspects. These included Toyota, by no means the biggest producer of factory built houses in Japan, but a familiar name; Hutchinson Whampoa, who own the port of Felixstowe and had co-founded the Orange mobile phone network, and were already involved with various developments of luxury apartments in central London; Lend Lease, the Australian developer who subsequently realised *Bluematter*, the last UK shopping mall of its era in the UK, and were planning large new housing developments in its vicinity; and IKEA, who were reported, wrongly, to be developing 'flat-pack' houses to sell for £7,500.

can now be perceived as, sadly, just another aspect of *rip-off Britain*.