

Fears are easily rationalised in the attic

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researching, developing and facilitating creative innovation

No. 12 Unterheydener Strasse, Rheydt: Cologne

German artist Gregor Schneider opens the doors of Hannelore Reuen's home to the public. Over 15 years, Schneider has gutted the house, which was previously uninhabitable because of a nearby industrial complex, and subverted the meanings of shelter, protection and unity that home principally offers. A labyrinth of passageways become small crawling spaces, windows that look over the house's external walls when opened by viewers, became gateways to more interior walls, ceilings are layered with more ceilings and all navigational signs merely become routes back into the interior maze. In the guts of the house is a soundproofed, windowless room entered by a door left ajar. It has no handle on one side, and a banal, non-functional, doorknob on the other. Once the door is closed, whatever is in the space remains — there's no way out or in. It's a perception of dead space, the antithesis of the safe-space or the fashionable US panic room that protects its cash rich residents from any external threat. The function of Schneider's room (so far, it has never been closed) is to induce irrational anxiety in spectators/consumers. It serves as a lynchpin of the imagination, a container for multiple possibilities that are never resolved or realised.

Number 12 with its fictional tenant, whose presence is known only by the name on the front door, acts as a metaphor for many of the debates around the complex co-locations of physical and virtual space. It meshes the dynamics of a physical space, underpinned by the commonplace activity of 'dropping into' an ordinary house on a street, with the imagination, drawing on fears and desires. It also illustrates the shifting roles of the citizen within what is now a complex entanglement of public and private environments. Schneider's house makes both host and visitor complicit in the act of responsibility and exposure. The creator of the residential nest by giving over the privacy of home to public consumption and the visitor who engages with his physical network, making meanings from the structure, creating scenarios and imagining consequences.

Converging media technologies have meant that a user's behaviours and actions are now dependent not on the perception of traversing through a boundless space, or an alternative reality, but of an imagined series of places and scenarios, forever communicated and mediated through the physical space. The starting point for this place is the 'home', or structure of the house. French theorist Gaston Bachelard wrote in the fifties that it is the first universe for us, it shapes "all knowledge of the larger cosmos". His concern however is not spatiality, but the character of specific constructed spaces. In the house, these can be the cellar, the attic or the closet to external constructions: the solace offered by the hut, the self-organised structure of the garret, the fragile, mobile shell. Each place within a space communicates a set of parameters, a series of behaviours and memories. Each space encountered in future scenarios will evoke a state of reverie and daydreaming.

Advanced digital networks, service provision and personal communication devices have collapsed the perceived divide between exterior and interior worlds. The shifting parameters that define these worlds, like Schneider's house, become inverted to serve less as fixtures on which to imagine, but rather as lucid gateways that usher in a mesh of environments. The fragmentary flow of private and public communication is increasingly blurred. The text message spelling out a public service message or a GPS induced alert, continually reconfigures social and intimate spaces, transporting us to the heaven-bound attic with its skylights or plunging us into the subterranean cellar where irrational fears are fuelled. The points in between the nodes are fleeting glimpses down corridors – routes through the network. Like Schneider's hallways, they may take us nowhere, but they promise to keep us connected, mainlined into the imagination.

Personal communication devices have transformed social behaviour and our relationship to our first universe. We are everywhere, the public and private residue of us available on answer messages, delayed text sending, community news groups. Even when we switch off, service providers bank messages, keeping us present, wired, connected. The house was the place of eternal return which is now supplanted by virtual containers of data that enable us to return, check, connect and be reassured. Private technologies have enabled homes to become switchboards: we are the terminal operators, choosing whether to stray from the home page, tune into other elements of our domestic mediascapes, or tune out. The illusion is that we never get lost and we stay relatively unexposed and in control in the house. But our relationship with mobile personal communication devices has added another layer to notions of home and public space. The tiny shells that we transport with us may appear an invisible accessory and the recipient's voice inaudible, but the eponymous ring tone of the mobile phone, together with one-way dialogue streams, disrupt the behavioural principles of social space and are therefore censored by the issue of responsible codes of conduct. To go against these soft rulings is to be exposed. We drift in and out of self and institutional control, assurance and instability, being protected and being lost – worlds slipping into worlds.

Goethe's Virtual Garden House, Weimar Park on the Ilm River, Weimar

New media company, Artimedia, builds a virtual counterpart to Goethe's Garden House that stands a short distance from the original in Weimar's Park. The simulated house is an exact, million pound replica, complete with a white picket fence at the front that stops visitors from trampling the greenery, and directs them to the house's side entrance. Inside, visitors compare and contrast (albeit with memory) with the original: Goethe's writing desk, the small bed underneath the window, the locked cabinet, the wooden flooring, the colour of off-white walls (significantly to imply age and the

passing of time in the original). Yet two differences are clear. In the virtual house, none of the rooms is policed — touching and using the furniture is encouraged as a measure against the original house in which handling is not allowed, and an invigilator guards each room. In the virtual house, the windows are opened; in the second, windows are non-functional structures, sealed to ensure controlled room temperature.

The two houses — one virtual and uninhabited, the other real, lived in centuries ago — are metaphors for wider social spaces, the issuing of institutional rules, meanings and subsequent behaviours. Visitors were noticeably chattier in the virtual house, the tactility of the furnishings served to lever intimacy, as the restraints and the preserved space of the original were absent. In the replicated house, a more interactive, play environment was encouraged — impossible in the original.

These two containers serve as a model for understanding new social spaces within a technological landscape. The points of connection between the two: the short walk across the park in Weimar from one house to the next; the hallways that link Schneider's rooms with their walls behind walls serve as routes to limitless possibilities. Between the point we have come from and the point we are travelling to, lie the placeholders for private reverie. These houses enable us to travel through doors to reconstructed places that are no longer lived in, but carry the reassuring memories of inhabitation and the residue of presence.

Goethe's virtual house is key to the social impact of technologies. Digital space is merely evoked by notions of the rapid spawning of multiple simulated copies, the creation of artificial space and the user as centre stage producer. Meaning and memory is independent of the materiality of technology: the consumption of slick product lines, the fetishization of smart gadgetry, or the experience of computer breakdown and batteries running low. If Schneider's house suggests the cellar, and thus induces irrational fears and the complicity of private host to public spectator, then Goethe's simulation issues a public institutional model in which the replica provides the environment for intimate, playful social behaviour, albeit controlled and cared for under the approval of private investors. The virtual house has been dismantled and is flatpacked in storage in Weimar, awaiting collection from a Japanese investment bank. It will serve as a showcase, situated on the other side of the world from its real counterpart.

"The ultimate, to construct, has that, that is to inhabit, as its end," wrote Heidegger. Number 12 and Goethe's Garden Houses are physical spaces with no end; inhabitation is shared, fleetingly by visitors, permanently in the present, offering a portal to the imagination. Bachelard wrote that without the house, our first universe, man would be dispersed. As personal communication devices become meshed with the everyday, technology impacts on the social, fluid communication streams develop, independent of the home as a place of eternal return.

Bachelard's 'corner of the cosmos' certainly pervades, driven through networked technologies into diverse public and private spaces, remembered and imagined in the mind. But what of its spatial character? Our 'corner of the cosmos' is unfixed, its edges now soft, always mobile, always mutating.

Gregor Schneider's Dead House Ur, 1985- was open to the public in 2000
Goethe's Virtual Garden House was installed as part of Weimar's European City of Culture exhibition, 1999

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