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Show apartments as ‘aesthetic traps’:

Risk, enchantment and illusory homes in London’s Olympic Park

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Biography: Drawing on theories from material culture and political economy, my research takes an ethnographic approach to examining the meaning and making of community in urban neighbourhoods. My work explores community as an imaginary, practice and goal of social policy goal, paying particular attention to how urban spatial policy, architecture and public space intersect with notions of home, community and citizenship in east London.

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This article offers a new analysis of the ‘show apartment’ as a device to disguise the power imbalance between prospective buyers of new off-plan homes and the global network of institutions that drive property development and mortgage-finance industries. Applying Gell’s notion of the ‘aesthetic trap’ (1996) to an ethnographic account of show apartments in a new neighbourhood in London’s Olympic Park, the article demonstrates how show apartments are an illusory form at the apex of a process of risk and commodification that disguises and normalises the risks to which potential homeowners are exposed.

Keywords: show apartments, display homes, community, citizenship, London, Olympic Park.

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My mobile phone beeps and a text message arrives from the housebuilder Taylor Wimpey notifying me that “A queue is starting to form outside the sales office” at Chobham Manor. It is around 7 pm on 22 January 2015, the evening before the first new homes go on sale at Chobham Manor, the first of five planned new neighbourhoods, and around 10,000 new homes, that will be built in London’s Olympic Park as a major part of the legacy promise of the 2012 Games.

When the text arrives, I am on my way to a community meeting so it is past 9 pm by the time I return to find out what is happening at the sales office. Lights are on in the apartment blocks of East Village, the recently refurbished Olympic Athletes’ Village that overlooks Chobham Manor’s construction site, but the streets are deserted and the neighbourhood is unusually quiet. I wonder whether the queue of prospective buyers will have dispersed because of the bitter cold. The only signs of life are a van in the car park selling cups of tea, and a small white marquee erected on the grass in front of the sales office. As I approach I can hear voices inside the marquee. A conversation is underway about the “tricks” that housebuilders play to make show homes seem larger than they are: “They don’t hang doors in the doorways and they use small-scale furniture!” says a disembodied voice followed by wry laughter from others.

The marquee is tightly sealed; I walk around twice before finding a corner entrance and fumble to open the flaps. As I do, a woman inside says: “Ah, someone else to join the party.” Inside there is a small camp: a row of two-person dome tents, interspersed with fold-up chairs, curves around the marquee walls. I count twelve people, although I suspect there are more unseen in the tents. It is dark and almost as cold in the marquee as outside, but the atmosphere feels festive. The campers seem well prepared with quilted jackets, hats, gloves, blankets, pillows, flasks and food. In front of one tent are two small chrome pillars and a red rope, as you might find outside a

nightclub for crowd control. Given the lack of heating and lighting, the red rope is both incongruous and playful, but is effective at signalling the occupier has a different status to the other campers. The queue of prospective buyers starts at this tent and its owner, a woman in her late 20s, sits behind the red rope.

I am welcomed into the marquee as a fellow buyer, although I say straight away that I am here as a researcher following the process of Chobham Manor's transformation from Olympic promise to reality as a new neighbourhood. I address everyone when I ask if it is okay to question their motivations for spending a night in sub-zero temperatures to guarantee a place in the queue. The woman in the first tent says yes - as if giving her permission for me to talk to everyone. She and her fiancée have been queuing since 10am the previous day - 36 hours by the time we meet - to be sure of purchasing one of the two-bedroom apartments that will overlook the Olympic Park. They rent a flat in Hackney and want to buy their own home and start a family. She describes visiting the Park and the sales office the previous summer:

“We saw all the kids running around and playing in the pond... having a safe environment for kids to grow up is really important. Who wouldn't want to bring up their kids in a nature reserve? Green spaces in London are in really short supply.”

In the second tent are A and J, a couple in their late 20s, who share a rented flat in Woodford, east London. A had previously worked in urban planning so felt he knew a lot about the Olympic Park's development programme. Being near the Olympic Park and Stratford's transport connections is what appeals to them. They have been saving for a year to raise a 10% deposit for a one-bedroom apartment and are camping-out to be sure of securing a home. Next in line is S, in his late 40s, sitting alone in a fold-up camping chair, and opposite him at the end of the queue, also in a camping chair, is R, of a similar age. They both live in the same town in Surrey and work at Canary Wharf,

once London's Docklands and now a gleaming post-modern financial centre in east London. Neither knew that the other was going to be spending the night queuing to buy a new home. R, at the end of the queue, jokes that if he had known, he would have made sure he arrived earlier to be in front of his colleague and neighbour. S is buying an apartment as an investment, although he thinks he may also live there for a while. "He is the Wolf of Wall Street," R jokes and goes on to explain that after 20 years of daily commuting from Surrey to Canary Wharf, he is buying to be closer to work. He will swap his Surrey house for a smaller flat in the Olympic Park and relocate with his family. R has been queuing since the afternoon to buy one of a limited number of parking spaces on offer with the apartments. I ask if Chobham Academy, the brand new school for Olympic Park residents, influenced his decision, but he shrugs and says not really, it is the parking space - a scarce resource in London - that is worth queuing for.

Beyond the desire to purchase a home at Chobham Manor, there is no recognisable pattern in the life circumstances of the prospective buyers in the queue. The group is small yet diverse - varying in age, ethnicity, race, life stage, sexual identity, background, and country of birth. Some want their first home, some want a second home, others are investors. Some describe themselves as 'local', while some are from other parts of Britain or live overseas. What they share is a willingness to make an emotional and financial commitment to a home and community that do not yet exist beyond the two-dimensional materialities of planning - maps, plans, texts, and models. The 'homes' they intend to buy in the morning are an idea of the future that will not come into being in a form that is habitable for at least another nine months.¹

¹ Delayed construction meant the first homes at Chobham Manor were not occupied until February 2016 -13 months after the first homes were released for sale.

Housing at Chobham Manor, like many other new-build neighbourhoods and apartment blocks under construction across London, is sold ‘off-plan’, meaning buyers pay a deposit to secure a specific plot at a fixed price in a future development. Off-plan sales are a technique used by housebuilders to secure ‘forward’ finance and mitigate the risks of development. Although off-plan sales figures are not reported in official statistics, the volume of new-build housing for sale in London means that buying an off-plan home has become both increasingly common and increasingly competitive. Chobham Manor’s temporary encampment exemplifies the extraordinary lengths to which prospective home-owners will (or must?) go in order to purchase property in the capital², where the effects of the UK’s long-term housing crisis are most acutely felt (Edwards, 2016).

The economic and political drivers of the housing crisis are the subject of an extensive critical literature that documents and theorizes the nations’ shift from post-war “welfare capitalism” (Esping-Anderson, 1990), characterized by state-led mass housing, health and education provision, to the privatization over four decades of public services, welfare, labour markets and, most significantly, housing in the context of wider neo-liberal reforms (Davidson and Lees, 2010; Hodgkinson et al., 2013; Lees et al., 2008; Raco, 2005; Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Watt, 2013; Watt and Minton, 2016). Since the late 1970s, the erosion of public housing stocks and growth of mortgage-financed home ownership as a means of wealth accumulation and speculative investment have been state-sponsored initiatives leading to a critical shortage of affordable housing, the growth of private tenancies and buy-to-let landlordism (Edwards, 2016, 2015).

² Overnight queues at new off-plan housing developments in other areas of London were reported by news media on several occasions in 2015 (Sheffield, 2015; Slawson et al., 2015).

This article takes a different perspective on questions of power, risk and inequality in London's housing market by examining the show-home as a "technology of imagination" (Sneath et al., 2009) which mediates the absence of an actual property in off-plan transactions. Off-plan properties have a peculiar nature: as immaterial commodities that offer the promise of certainty in a volatile and high-risk housing market. Yet off-plan buyers must project themselves into an imaginary future of multiple unknowns - into the psycho-sensory, symbolic and material worlds of a home and community that do not yet exist, and into an economic future in which a not-yet house in a not-yet place remains desirable, affordable, and potentially profitable, throughout the duration of its coming-into-being.

Housebuilders use an array of proxies to mediate the absence of a physical property in off-plan transactions. At Chobham Manor these include maps, plans, videos, a 3D 'fly-through' model, and two show apartments - decorated and furnished display properties that prospective buyers can visit to view the size, layout and finish of off-plan housing. In this sense, show apartments are a critical interface between potential and risks: of individual aspirations for home, self and family, the promise of thriving new communities in the Olympic Park, and the numerous realities that might intervene to unseat these futures.

Design historians have analysed the emergence and use of show or display homes and model apartments throughout the 20th century as technologies that mediate the construction and consumption of modern lifestyles (Chapman, 2002; Floré and De Kooning, 2003; Ravetz, 2001; Ravetz and Turkington, 2011), and of shifting notions of morality, modernity and subjecthood in relation to cleanliness and comfort (Shove, 2003), changing gender roles and quasi-scientific approaches to household management (Ryan, 1997), and femininity and sexuality (Hackney, 2006; Hinds, 2010). This article

presents a new analysis of the show home as an illusory form at the apex of a process of risk and commodification, which acts to momentarily equalise the extreme power imbalance between individual home buyers and the complex network of institutions that drive the housing and global mortgage-finance industries. Drawing on Gell's notion of the 'trap' as an aesthetic form that embodies a nexus of intentionality between hunter and animal prey (1996), I argue the show apartments operate as 'aesthetic traps' that disguise and normalise the absence of actual homes, and thereby the risks to which potential homeowners are exposed, in such a way as to align the individual and corporation in their roles as buyer and seller. This article is based on ethnographic research carried out between 2013 and 2016 examining the question of what it means to build a 'sustainable and successful community' in 21st century London from the perspective of a group of planners, architects, housebuilders, regeneration and community development practitioners involved in 'making' Chobham Manor.

Off-plan homes: buying a promise

In Britain, where home-ownership is often said to border on national obsession; the idea that buying a home is in the top three most stressful experiences of modern life is a narrative often repeated in everyday conversation and the media. For home-owners, a house is likely to be the largest purchase they will make in a lifetime. Yet buying a new home off-plan means purchasing a property that cannot be encountered or known in a bodily or sensory way. Instead what is exchanged between buyer and seller is a commitment to acquire an off-plan plot. An off-plan plot comprises several elements: a spatial location within a development, and in the case of apartments, within a specific building; an architectural design known as a house-type, which combines structural form and materials; an interior arrangement of space known as a floor plan; in many

cases, a choice of interior fit-out from a limited range of options like kitchen or bathroom units; and a duration of time until completion date. In this sense, an off-plan plot is a spatio-temporal promise: an idea - albeit highly specified - of a future home.

Location - as estate agents, home improvement TV shows, and property magazines regularly pronounce - is the most important factor in determining the market desirability and value of housing. Yet dwelling is, in considerable part, a psycho-sensory experience - a series of interactions between people, buildings, and the wider environment, that are emotional, physical, psychological and temporal responses to stimuli and space (Pink, 2003; Tilley, 2006). Putting aside the geographic and symbolic aspects of a home, few people would disagree that some places, rooms or buildings have more character or atmosphere than others. Light, shadow, a view, the patina of materials, and background sounds lend space existential qualities that are more than the sum of location, walls and windows. As phenomenological theorists argue, space is intricately entwined with being, memory, dreams and personhood (Bachelard, 1992; Merleau-Ponty, 2013; Norberg-Schulz, 1971). Purchasing a house involves emotional and sensory judgements as well as geographic and economic ones, and arguably even investors who are buying an asset rather than a home should consider the influence, and therefore the value, of the feelings that space invokes for future dwellers or purchasers. Off-plan buyers must engage with 'home' as a potentiality – a promise and possibility of material, social and economic futures – and, as this article goes on to argue, the show apartment places a critical role in mediating the material absence of an actual home through carefully executed design and financial practices.

To lessen the presence and impact of these risks, housebuilders take considerable efforts to communicate to prospective buyers that off-plan properties promise certainty in an unpredictable housing market. Prospective buyers are

encouraged to see an off-plan home as an antidote to the stress, delays, and uncertainty of buying a ‘second-hand’ home. The website of Taylor Wimpey, one of the UK’s largest house builders, lists eight ways in which buying a new home circumnavigates these problems. The first of these is: “Less chain means less stress and hassle” – offering prospective homeowners respite from the need to become embroiled in social relations with unknown others - vendors, competing buyers, property agents, surveyors, mortgage providers - or to compete with other buyers and risk paying too high a price or being ‘gazumped’.³ “Your home will be high specification” is the second, in which “sparkling new appliances”, insulation, and appropriate heating counter the potential material failures of a second-hand home - cold, damp, leaks, dangerous wiring or an unpredictable boiler. An off-plan home is presented as offering a certainty that purchasing a second-hand home does not, because of the character of the risks involved: one is a fixed purchase price; another is a ten-year warranty provided by the National House Builders Federation, which protects buyers by ensuring new-build homes meet industry standards and provides insurance and resolution support if problems arise. A guarantee of structural integrity, in the form of a warranty, removes the need for prospective buyers to inspect an actual home, and in this sense, it dematerialises the architectural structure. Furthermore, an off-plan home has an imagined ‘purity’ - lacking any unwelcome traces of previous dwellers or the likelihood of material failure - as this extract from the Chobham Manor website claims:

“From the day you move in, you’ll love the fact that everything in your new home is clean and untouched. If you’ve reserved early enough in the build process you’ll

³ ‘Gazumping’ or ‘being gazumped’ is defined by the HomeOwners Alliance as “when another party makes a higher offer on the house you are in the process of buying and has that offer accepted, thus pushing you out of the purchase” - <https://hoa.org.uk/advice/guides-for-homeowners/i-am-buying/what-is-gazumping-how-avoid-it/>

get to choose from a range of brand new carpets, fixtures and fittings that will be installed in your new home before you move in. Which means as soon as you unpack you can enjoy each room in your dream home.”

And so the list continues: “You could save money on bills”, “You can finish your home your way”, “Your home will suit your modern lifestyle”, “You’ll have peace of mind”, “You could be part of a new community”, “Stay safe and sound.”⁴ Returning momentarily to the overnight campers in Chobham Manor’s marquee, these promises of certainty unquestionably resonate with the motivations of the potential home-owners. A and J explicitly identify the promise of a fixed price as advantageous - enabling them to buy a future home at current market prices while giving them more time to save and find a mortgage offer that is affordable. However, they are quick to point out that a good deal is a relative concept in London, where house prices have risen faster than household incomes for a number of years. “Affordability”, they explain, is not the same thing as “affordable” housing. “Affordability” is, in this context, a judgement about the risk of being priced-out of the housing market and the long-term insecurity this is felt to represent, against the risk of over-stretching household finances and “hedging bets” against future rises or losses in London’s housing market. A and J describe the trade-offs that influence their judgement to buy now that include job and relationship security, individual aspirations, a choice between high rents or high mortgage debt, long commutes versus smaller homes, and the lack of control that the prospect of long-term renting presents. The latter figures significantly in the accounts of many young people I meet during fieldwork, for whom the impossibility of home ownership is experienced as a suspension of adulthood and an obstacle to self-making.

⁴ <https://www.taylorwimpey.co.uk/buying-with-us/why-choose-us/why-buy-new>. Accessed September 2016.

Financial certainty conveys considerable benefits to housebuilders and their financiers as well as home buyers. “Forward funding”, as property agents describe off-plan sales, provides a predictable flow of capital to fund the high-risk exercise of constructing a new neighbourhood over a number of years. In a global city like London, property and financial markets are closely linked, and movements in one can be catastrophic for another, as the 2008 sub-prime mortgage crisis demonstrated. Consequently, prospective buyers must make a trade-off between a fixed price and the risk that an off-plan property could be worth less when materialised than on contractual completion of the sale. This is a genuine risk: in 2007, Steven Dowd bought two off-plan properties at Caspian Wharf in Bow, east London, from Berkeley Homes, with mortgages for 90 per cent of the value. Dowd attempted to withdraw from the sale when the mortgage-lender advised that property values had dropped by 30 per cent. Berkeley Homes threatened legal action, prompting Dowd to launch The Berkeley Collective, a campaign group to support other off-plan purchasers in the same position. An article in The Guardian about the case reported that 300 similar claims against ‘defaulters’ had been started by property developers.⁵

Shine and illusion

Chobham Manor announces itself in large silver-coloured letters, which in scale and aspiration seem more like sculpture than sign. The letters sit on a manicured lawn, punctuated with low box hedges and formal flowerbeds with striking, angular plants. Behind the sign is the Marketing Suite - or sales office - where prospective buyers can

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2010/feb/01/property-developers-off-plan-investors> accessed September 2016.

view Chobham Manor's two show apartments. The Marketing Suite faces west, oriented towards the green spaces and waterways of the Olympic Park on the opposite side of the street, and further afield towards central London and the City. Notably, it does not turn east towards the established low-income neighbourhoods that mark the Olympic Park's eastern boundary.

Entering the Marketing Suite involves moving through a series of zones - each with a distinct material signature - that transition visitors from the Olympic Park to Chobham Manor and ultimately, if they make it that far, to the show apartments on the first floor. The first zone, which favours "natural planting" in the form of large wild flowerbeds, long grasses and wooden seats and benches, moves people from the Olympic Park to Chobham Manor by way of a manicured lawn, formal planting and a cobbled path and small fountains (see figure 1). The second zone moves visitors inside - past a reception area, which seems to encourage people to present themselves and offer their credentials as potential buyers. Next, visitors move into an exhibition space that offers information about Chobham Manor's connections to other areas of London, CGI images of future homes and streets, and commitments to environmental sustainability. A 3D digital model on a touchscreen table offers visitors the chance to fly through the future neighbourhood and zoom in on specific plots to inspect floorplans and the views from different apartments.

[Figure 1. Chobham Manor Marketing Suite, September 2015.]

On one of my visits to Chobham Manor's show apartments, the plot of a five-bedroom town-house is for sale. The Moselle is the last available property in phase one, its prospective buyer having recently pulled out of the sale. The sale price is £999,995,

the same price as when it was first released nearly a year before. In London's distorted housing market, The Moselle appears to represent something of a bargain⁶, although still not a purchase decision to be taken lightly. On this visit, the 3D digital model of Chobham Manor is not working, so a fly-through the neighbourhood to find the town house and look at its design, aspect, and location is not possible. In the absence of an architectural model that we can touch and see, the sales team refer me to a brochure to work out where the home will be and what it will look like. The brochure contains an A3 double-page CGI image of the Olympic Park. Chobham Manor is at the centre of the image and various London landmarks are highlighted to help situate the future neighbourhood. We have some difficulty locating The Moselle plot and need to confer with the sales office manager. After a few minutes of scanning the picture, and a couple of false starts, we find the town house, although the picture's perspective means the property is partly obscured by a neighbouring mansion block. The sales officer circles it and puts a dot where the front door might be (see figure 2). The image is smaller than my finger nail.

[Figure 2. Biro dot indicating The Moselle townhouse in the Chobham Manor brochure.]

I am not a prospective house buyer, but I ask the sales team what would happen next if I were, and I am invited to view the show apartments on the first floor of the sales office. A staircase leads to the two show apartments, each on either side of a hallway, their doors firmly closed. In between are offices where serious prospective buyers discuss reservation fees, deposits and contracts. Though the show apartments

⁶ By comparison, a three-bedroom terraced house in London Fields, a similarly family-friendly neighbourhood in Hackney, sold for £1,325,000 in 2014.

are open to the public, having passed through different zones and crossed numerous thresholds to reach this point I have a sense of gaining privileged access to this space.

Hotel chic: erasing the reality of home

Chobham Manor's show apartments quite literally sparkle with reflective surfaces, materials and objects. Stepping into the entrance hall, I am confronted by a glistening silver mosaic mirror with my reflection at its centre. I have only just crossed the threshold and already I am an actor in the relational performance of imagined dwelling. The mirror hangs above a narrow, high-gloss, white table where three objects - a chrome bowl, a clear glass vase, and a black-and-white image of a baby in a silver frame - are carefully arranged (see figure 3). Behind the mirror and the table is a panel of textured silver and grey wallpaper; the other walls are white. The overhead lights, the mixture of reflecting materials and surfaces, and lack of clutter make the light appear to bounce off the walls.

[Figure 3. Entrance hall in one of the show apartments at Chobham Manor in 2016.]

I move into one of the bedrooms where the use of reflective materials continues, with mirrored panels on either side of the double bed, glass light fittings, satin-effect cushions arranged on the bed covers, and more carefully placed chrome objects. Another bedroom is seemingly decorated with a teenager in mind: brightly coloured curtains, bed covers, desk and armchair mark it out as a non-adult space. The innermost part of the apartment is the open-plan kitchen, dining and living room at the end of the hallway that runs the length of the interior. Immediately in front of the living-room door is a dining table set for six. Large wine glasses, silver candles, a tall glass jug and tall perspex salt and pepper grinders create a sense of height and formality (see figure

4). An elaborate glass lampshade above the table intensifies the shine from the collection of reflective surfaces. Nearby, two cocktail glasses and a chrome cocktail shaker wait on a coffee table in front of an L-shaped sofa with velvet cushions. Opposite the sofa is a low sideboard made of a white high-gloss material, on which sit more silver-framed photographs of children, chrome artefacts, a small selection of books and a small glass vase. The kitchen has white, high-gloss fitted cupboards and is equipped with cream and chrome appliances - kettle, toaster, coffee machine, blender. A single copper pan is on the hob with a cookbook propped up nearby. There are no handles to break up the smooth lines, and light from the room's picture window creates a mirror-like reflection of the trees outside. Even the dark floors have a reflective sheen. The air is heavily perfumed and I begin to feel overwhelmed by the bright lights, shining surfaces and mixture of fragrances.

[Figure 4. Dining-room display in one of the show apartments at Chobham Manor in 2016.]

The combination of light, reflection and texture in Chobham Manor's show apartments present an interesting challenge to Young's work on the power of 'neutral' interiors in London's second-hand property market. Young argues that 'neutrality' has become a socially acceptable, genderless currency (2004, p. 13) - signified by white, beige or magnolia walls, wood floors, and white fittings in kitchens and bathrooms - that enhances the exchange value of property because it potentiates the movement and making of fluid selves, while colour, texture, and pattern impede this flow by seeming to cramp and darken space, but also 'attaching' too greatly to the personality and taste of the vendor (Young, 2004, p. 9). Young's 'neutrality' is clearly not neutral – it both dematerialises and commodifies the properties that Young examines by working to shift

a buyer's attention from a building's structural materiality to the agentive potential of its interior surfaces, which are spaces to be animated by the people and things that dwell inside. McCracken's examination of "homeyness" in north American domestic practices (2005) concurs with Young's argument that colour, texture and pattern 'attach' to the dwellers. 'Homeyness', McCracken argues, is understood as a symbolic property of many aspects of domestic materiality that have forms of personal significance – mediating relations with family, friends or pets, celebrating memories, or playfully expressing aspects of family identity – and is explicitly a process of self and family-making that is about creating an environment that communicates its status as 'lived-in'.

Chobham Manor's show apartments contain numerous high-gloss white surfaces – kitchen units, ceilings, doors and bathroom fittings - yet the whiteness of these surfaces is overwhelmed by a multiplicity of other textures, colours, patterns and object tableaux, which do little to blend into the background. The result is far from Young's description of neutrality that dematerialises built form in order to foreground the project of self and home-making. Chobham Manor's interiors deliberately and forcefully materialise an idealised aesthetic that appears to suggest a different way of dwelling is possible. The patterned and textured silver and grey wallpaper, deep purple quilted velvet headboards, arrays of silk and velvet cushions, purple bath towels, a 'feature' wall where one surface in a room is singled out with a bright 'accent' colour - are characteristic of a style of interior design called hotel chic - "hotel style translated to real life", as the blog of the same name claims⁷. Hotel chic, like Young's neutrality, is constructed from a set of defined stylistic patterns that are clearly and consistently

⁷ See <http://hotelchicblog.com/> accessed September 2016.

categorised by interior designers and stylists. A plethora of books, magazine articles, blogs, home-makeover TV shows, and DIY YouTube videos offering guidance on how to ‘get the look’⁸ are testimony to its popular appeal. The design philosophy behind hotel chic embraces sophistication, glamour and the suspension of reality. The hotel is “a perfect opposite” of home (Douglas, 1991, p. 304) offering relief from the mundane and repetitive aspects of dwelling - the dirt, detritus and labour that are an inescapable part of household management; hotels dematerialise this effort - rooms are refreshed by invisible staff when occupiers are absent and meals can be conjured without thought. Traces of previous dwellers are eradicated, and so hotels epitomise the same promise of cleanliness that off-plan homes promise, and seem to offer an alternative kind of dwelling, which promises flow and movement, a permanent but desirable mobility that is unfettered by the tyranny of home (ibid, 1991) for prosperous citizens of a global world. The materiality of the show apartments is indexical of a certain aspirational lifestyle in which the messy reality of home is absent.

Disguising absence: “A home, all homes”

Each room and object tableau in Chobham Manor’s show apartments is suggestive of an imagined social world within the home. The cocktail glasses imply sophistication; the supper table conveys imminent sociality; the highly polished object-displays suggest control and order; and the framed photographs situate the household in networks of kinship ties and obligations. Yet the show apartments are not homes, and for all their cues to social connectedness, prosperity and morality, they occupy a liminal position

⁸ See for example - <https://www.houzz.co.uk/ideabooks/44734885/list/styling-16-boutique-hotel-tricks-to-copy-at-home> accessed September 2016.

between imagination and reality. Interior decoration is a process of self-making directed aspirationally at potential others (Attfield, 1999), however these interiors are not a project of self-making. Each object has been selected and arranged to materialise an aesthetic that is executed by a professional interior designer - the result of a chain of corporate decisions. Anthropological work on modern urban domestic interiors identifies the home as a critical site of intersection between producers and consumers, where corporate and domestic decision-making intersect and ideas are converted into commodities (Shove, 2006); however, much of this work focuses on the agency of dwellers and the practices they pursue to appropriate commodities - objects, furnishings, sometimes also housing - and give meaning to the selection and configuration of domestic space. The extraordinary complexity of the networks that shape these processes is, Shove argues, often glossed over, leaving the relationship between corporate and domestic unexamined (ibid).

At Chobham Manor the interface of corporate and domestic decision-making visibly overlaps but in a different way. As I walk around the show apartment I notice that a suitcase, umbrella, handbag and pair of shoes are in the large cloakroom cupboard. They look awkward; something in the arrangement does not feel right, and when I come to think about it later, I realise the projection of an imagined dweller into the show apartment feels uncomfortable. The show apartment's object-tableaus - framed photographs, cocktail glasses, coffee-table books - are suggestive of potential sociality in a way that does not imply actual dwelling. Instead, the careful selection and curation of objects produce a sense of domestic familiarity. In the cultural logic of a British household, they are the right kind of objects in the right kind of places to be recognisable as the things that mediate social ties in the home and between the home and the outside world. Taking the framed photographs as an example - large black-and-

white photographs in silver frames are positioned opposite the front door, on the bedside tables, and in a prominent arrangement on a sideboard, opposite the room's main seating area, in the living room. The presentation of family photographs in a home is not casual: photographs are efficacious social objects (Drazin and Frohlich, 2007, p. 51) - a creative effort to materialise kin networks and demonstrate a future intention to maintain ties as well as to celebrate and memorialise. The presentation of photographs at Chobham Manor is not casual either: the images are of happy, healthy, smiling children - a metaphor for future prosperity; the silver frames suggest the images are highly valued, representing important relationships for the household (see figure 5). However, the social ties these images articulate are imagined. The images are of someone's children, but whose? The interior designer? Or a stock photograph bought from an image agency? The images are still the efficacious objects that Drazin and Frohlich describe; however, the relationships they mediate are of a different order. Abstracted from their own networks of relations, whether familial or corporate, the children in the photographs undergo a transformation: instead of mediating specific kin relations, they become general representations, proxies for all the possible kinship ties and obligations that a moral social home could and should maintain.

The shine, arrangement, and careful curation of the photographs suggests that prospective buyers are intended to notice the individual objects and relate to them, perhaps unconsciously thinking: "That could be my child, grandchild, or family friend". However, I argue that the photographs and other object displays are not meant to be noticed as individual artefacts because their efficacy is in their relationship as a whole and the sense of continuity this produces between actual and imagined homes. As an assemblage, the show apartments are just 'real' enough to generate a sense of continuity between actual and imagined homes, yet as individual objects the photographs, furniture

and object tableaux lose their power. The show apartments are not a simulacrum or poor stand-in for home; instead, they are a totemic representation of the social world of urban homes. Not *a* home, but the possibility of *all* comfortable middle-class homes.

Illusory homes, disconnected localities

As I walk around the show apartments with the sales team I ask a series of questions that I imagine prospective home owners might also raise: Are any of the rooms the same size as those in The Moselle townhouse? Is the layout of the kitchen the same? Does the show home share the same aspect? Are the floor-to-ceiling windows the same? Can I visit the plot where The Moselle will be situated? The answer to all of these questions is ‘no’.

I feel perplexed by the lack of connection between the show apartments and The Moselle town-house. I understand that building a model of each house-type at Chobham Manor is impractical and prohibitively expensive; however, the lack of any home to see, touch and interact with is unsettling. I ask if there is a similar house-type anywhere else in London I could visit; again, the answer is ‘no’: the Moselle has been designed exclusively for Chobham Manor. I am told that if I wanted to buy The Moselle, I could pay a reservation fee of £3,500 today and a 10% deposit in four weeks’ time, at which point I am contractually bound to complete on the sale.

I am struck by the peculiarity of this transaction: the emotional weight and financial risk of committing to buy an absent home seem disproportionate to the technologies intended to mediate that risk – maps, brochures, images, and display rooms. The show apartments appear to create a space for prospective buyers to momentarily project themselves into an alternate reality where new possibilities for home, self, family and prosperity can be imagined. However, prospective buyers are

not trying-on alternative identities as they might while visiting a department store where they can imaginatively indulge in different lifestyles - as Shove describes the experience of visiting IKEA (2006). Nor can they buy the interior finishes and flourishes that are on display. In spite of the carefully curated room displays and the attention that interior design receives on Taylor Wimpey's website, when buyers take possession of their new homes at Chobham Manor the walls are whitewashed and the floors bare chipboard. This leaves me with a question about what the show apartments *do*? Devoid of a direct relationship to the not-yet Moselle town house a prospective buyer is left with a biro dot on a fingernail-size, slightly obscured CGI image, in a brochure: a million-pound biro dot?

I leave the show apartment but the feeling of dislocation I experience during the visit stays with me. Over the following weeks I reflect on my discomfort; discussing off-plan sales and the purpose of show apartments with the wider group of professionals who are engaged with my fieldwork and returning to Chobham Manor to talk to the sales office team. These interactions yield responses that are firmly focused on commercial concerns: a senior director at a house builder describes show apartments as an aspect of off-plan marketing intended to “de-risk the whole thing [development process]”, while for the sales team the show apartments are a vehicle to demonstrate the “upgrades that are available” - meaning the higher specification kitchens and bathrooms that prospective buyers can choose to invest in.

Reflecting on these comments, I realise the feeling of dislocation the show apartments prompt is driven not only by their abstract material status, but also by a disjuncture with the emphasis on ‘community’ building at Chobham Manor that has dominated my fieldwork until this point. Over the previous year, the question of what community means in an urban setting, and how to create and accelerate that sense of

community in a new neighbourhood, has pre-occupied the professionals working on Chobham Manor. ‘Community’ – conceptualised as a combination of local social relations, feelings of belonging, and practices of civic participation – is afforded considerable weight in British social policy. Since the late 1990s, creating communities that are socially cohesive, economically inclusive, resilient and self-sufficient has been the desired outcome of successive waves of urban policy (Imrie and Raco, 2003). Efforts to revitalize cities, improve safety and quality of life in urban neighbourhoods, and to shift responsibilities for local wellbeing from the state to citizens (Baron, 2004; Rodger, 2000), has seen ‘community’ emerge as part of a governance and policy apparatus that defines the normative urban subject through the performance of specific local citizenship practices, which are measured, monitored, and used as a proxy for the health of society (Woodcraft, 2020). At Chobham Manor, efforts to engender a sense of community are materialised through spatial and architectural forms that are distinctly and recognisably as a ‘London vernacular’ and understood to encourage social interaction: streets of terraced houses, urban blocks and neighbourhood public spaces, the use of brick, windows and rooflines that echo Georgian and Victorian London, and architecture that creates a flow of visual and social exchange between private and public space.

In this context, I had approached Chobham Manor’s show apartments as a critical interface between the Legacy vision of socially and economically flourishing communities and prospective dwellers; a vehicle to materialise the void where future home and community would be. However, it became evident that once inside the sales office the relations between household and community are supplanted by relations of a different order. ‘Community’ receives only passing references in the marketing materials available to potential buyers, which instead focus on the green space and

sports facilities in the Olympic Park, transport connections to other parts of London, and shopping, eating and entertainment at the nearby Westfield shopping mall. The style and tone of these statements and accompanying aerial images of the Olympic Park appear to speak to a generic audience with statements like: “Destined to become one of London’s most sought-after addresses, Chobham Manor offers an extensive selection of 1–5 bedroom homes.”⁹ There is very little to situate Chobham Manor in its east London context. The architecture and public space intended to engender a sense of community, which feature so prominently in the Olympic Park masterplan and which the architects, planners and community development professionals have worked on so carefully and intensively, appear only in CGI representations of people strolling along one of Chobham Manor’s terraced streets or neighbourhood park.

In this sense, the design intent of the Legacy vision - to create a community that is active, sociable, inclusive and cohesive - fractures at the critical intersection between future community and prospective community members. Instead of connecting prospective dwellers to the future community, the show apartments are revealed to be illusory and unstable potentialities that mediate the relationship between producer and consumer, global industry and individual homeowner: the imperative is to sell homes, not to build community. The show apartments, which appear to offer buyers a promise of certainty, are instead a device to mitigate the risks of property development and to orient those hazards towards the buyers.

⁹ See <https://chobhammanor.co.uk>, last accessed September 2018.

Conclusion: show apartments as ‘aesthetic traps’

Carsten and Hugh-Jones, drawing on Lévi-Strauss, describe the house as “an illusory objectification of the unstable relation of alliance to which it lends its solidity” (1995, p. 8) – an analysis of the metaphorical and material work ‘the house’ does to reconcile conflicted social relations and facilitate the reproduction of social orders through time. The authors address the potential conflicts in relations between men and women in the context of kinship, descent and alliance, examining the entanglement of the house and body in regulating social relations and practices (eating, sleeping, sex, child-rearing, ritual practices, death) and representing and reproducing the body-kinship-house in society. In this sense, the house is theorised as a problem-solving entity and a “productive fetishization” of social relations in order to forge new relations that ensure continuity over time (Gibson 1995, 129, as quoted by Buchli, 2013, p. 72), which remains in the background for much of the time, awareness of the house and what it does comes into being only in a crisis “under exceptional circumstances – house-moving, wars, fires, family rows, lost jobs or no money.” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995, p. 4). Carsten and Hugh-Jones’ notion of the house as an ‘illusory objectification of unstable relations’ can be productively extended from the kinship relations they analyse to the relationship between corporate vendor and potential home owner at Chobham Manor. The show apartments operate as ‘aesthetic traps’ (following Gell, 1996) working to disguise the immaterial character of an off-plan house, to mediate risk, and to bring buyer and seller into a temporary alliance that appears to equalise the disparity in power between individual and the expertise of a global industry. While buyers approach the show apartments as a way of ‘trying on’ the possibility of a new home and neighbourhood, I argue that the show apartment is an embodiment of Gell’s representation of the animal trap: “a transformed representation

of its maker, the hunter, and the prey animal, its victim, and of their mutual relationship”.

Chobham Manor’s show homes quite literally dazzle prospective buyers. The shine, reflective surfaces, silver frames, high-gloss floors and perfumed air create an overwhelming sensorium akin to what Gell, in the context of the Trobriand Kula flotilla canoe prow-boards, describes as psychological warfare in which art objects are deployed as weapons to cause the viewers to take leave of their senses (1998). The intricately carved prow-boards are intended to dazzle and demoralise the Trobrianders’ trading partners, causing them to offer shells and necklaces of greater value than they would be otherwise inclined to. Chobham Manor’s show apartments fulfil a similar function - overpowering prospective buyers with the surface shine of interiors that promise a fluid and obstacle-free form of dwelling and mask the absence of architectural structure or interior, home or domestic space. Gell argues that the power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody - the skill and virtuosity of the Trobriand craftsmen - and their power to cast a spell over us, so that we see the real world in an enchanted form. Prospective buyers at Chobham Manor are committing to purchase one thing - a future home - on the basis of seeing something entirely different. This is not to suggest that Chobham Manor’s show apartments, or show homes in general, are a deceit. No one is really fooled by the performance of dwelling that framed photographs or cocktail glasses suggest, which is why the uncomfortable incursion of shoes, handbag and umbrella in the cupboard feels jarring, because it interrupts the smooth working of the show apartment as a whole. For it is as a whole, as an overall impression of the social world of a middle-class home produced by the precise and careful selection of totemic objects and their configuration in patterns that follow an established cultural logic, that the show apartment mediates the absence

of an actual home. It must be just ‘real’ enough to appear unconsciously familiar, yet not so ‘real’ that the presence of actual human others may intrude into the promise.

There is one important distinction between Trobriand prow-boards and Chobham Manor’s show apartments in their use of technologies of enchantment: while the prow-boards are deployed between parties who have broadly equal status in order to give one of those parties an advantage, the dazzling surfaces and carefully-constructed displays of Chobham Manor’s show apartments work to mask, or even erase, enormous disparities in power and agency between buyer and seller. One function of show apartments is to create the appearance of relative equality between buyer and seller by reproducing a material environment that has a veneer of objectivity. In fact, the show home sits at the apex of a global assemblage of power, wealth, knowledge and expertise that incorporates insights from consumer psychology, marketing, architecture, design practice and mortgage finance, all directed towards potential buyers. In this sense, the energies and motivations of an entire global industry are bearing down on a single buyer, one individual at a time, in a process that is comparable to the machine-gambling industry that Schüll describes in *Addiction by Design* (2014). In the context of a chronic housing shortage, which in the public imaginary has reached crisis proportions, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that housebuilders are selling an illusion - an immaterial commodity in the form of a home that does not yet exist - and stimulating demand for this absent commodity by limiting its supply.

[ends]

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