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Fire Escape

The cultural history of the fire escape is inevitably woven into that of the urban flat or apartment – anxieties about living close to other people find expression in the narratives that use it as a setting. The urbanite wants to see and be seen, and yet is nervous of seeing and being seen; they seek a crowd and are lonely. Figures who find themselves between homes or kept out of homes find solace, company and secretive means of ingress and egress using these spaces. They have functioned as places of sociable friendliness, and improving or controlling instruction, spaces of relief from the demands of the home, and somewhere you might hang out before going home. In Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise's 1961 film, *West Side Story*, the Manhattan ironwork fire escapes quote the famous staging of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which depends upon the stage setting of a balcony (this is the balcony of Juliet's bedroom, open to the air, useful for eavesdropping, conversations between storeys, and entering and exiting without the rest of the household knowing).¹ This quotation and the copies it has inspired have turned the external fire escape into a symbol, for New York and tenement life. For many people, the fire escape quotes these scenes so insistently they are quick to deny their presence in English cities.² There are ironwork external escapes in most places with buildings that date back to the nineteenth century, so they are all over England. The denial, which comes quick and fast when you speak to people about English escapes, underlines the massive impact representations of space have on the way space is experienced. It also explains the geographical focus of the representations discussed here: when people think about fire escapes, these are the ones they think of.

This chapter takes into account both internal and external fire escapes. Internal escapes are bland and innocuous, negatives of the buildings they are in, following a pattern with institutional obedience. They offer, by law, alternative routes from a building in the event of a fire. In many buildings (particularly tall ones), the stairs are the only alternative to the lifts and so double as internal fire escapes. Many of the practices and pleasures examined here apply to shared, semi-public stairwells, but 'fire escape' is the centralizing theme because the stairwells I am interested in are only those which have been discarded in some way, or which only come into use in roundabout,

abnormal or unusual ways. Often decaying, they are almost always abandoned, empty of people with a few choice leftovers signalling a certain kind of use or misuse; an empty brandy bottle, a syringe, a used condom. The cold brick walls are painted in thick and occasionally peeling layers of pastel shades; the milky cream of weak tea, sad teal, pigeon grey. If there is light it is making its way through frosted glass, or buzzing from a shuddering halogen strip, which makes the whole place the colour of bathwater. External escapes are beautiful structures akin to blackly inked lines of scaffolding; they are fragile, like line drawings. They are by nature antiquated and cold,



FIGURE 4.1 'Do not open this door unless the house is on fire.' Photographs from Bessemer's patent, *On the dangers and difficulties inseparable from the methods at present employed in rescuing persons from dwelling houses when on fire* (London: Bedford Press, 1895).

dubious additions, rickety perches. Both internal and external escapes are like life boats stored on ocean liners, practical and functional, but at the same time, out of date or at the very least, best before now. This chapter addresses external and internal escapes, and while I will sketch the escape's development, I am concerned with representations and experiences of fire escapes when they are not being used to escape from fire. This other, often unintended use, forms the majority of these spaces and structures' occupation, and is obviously of a very different character to their intended use, which takes place during a catastrophic and life-endangering event.

1. The long and heavy ladder

The earliest fire escapes in London were roaming structures, which were moved on wheels from place to place as needed. Developed by philanthropists as a reaction to the high death rate at fires in domestic properties, the escapes were a freestanding series of ladders and a chute that stood at crossroads throughout the city from 8pm to 7am each night. They were manned by an escape conductor in a makeshift sentry box which, like the escape, would be stored in a nearby churchyard during the day.³ Funded by the Fire Escape Society and subsequently the Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire, the conductors were issued with a uniform cap, a tarpaulin coat and trousers, and a helmet, lamp and rattle. In 1837, a total of twelve escapes were positioned throughout the city and over the next forty years that number increased.⁴ At this time, the street escape stations were more numerous than fire stations. An apprentice-joiner, writing about his childhood in Mile End in the 1890s recalls: 'The escape ladder had to be pushed along in the upright position . . . it was a precarious operation, the long heavy ladder swaying from side to side, and almost beyond the capacity of any one fireman.'⁵ In a joint report made by the chief of police and the chief of the fire brigade, fire ladders were found to be the most effective object in the fight against fire. Their maintenance and manning was adopted into the first London Fire Engine Establishment in 1896. The moveable escape ladders were effective because they enabled access in this most haphazardly arranged of cities. The brigade chief, Braidwood, described how useful the machines were in 'the narrow streets, courts and alleys which abound in the city of London'.⁶

Fire escapes were part of the irregular set of laws and objects that make up the history of fire prevention. In England, party walls have been a legal requirement since the 1189 Assize of Buildings decree, though this was not enforced until after the Great Fire of London in 1666. This was the moment where serious consideration of the materials used for building was made: thatched roofs were outlawed, and brick was to replace timber. The rattle shaken by the fire conductor in the 1830s added to the noises of fire prevention – the evening bell that rang out in 872 CE to instruct people to

put out their fires, the *couvre feu* or curfew bell that accompanied Norman rule from 1066 telling people to cover their fires with a metal cover.⁷ In 1774 it was the responsibility of every parish in London to provide three or more escape ladders, a fire engine and a leather pipe. Throughout the 1800s patents appear for dubious ‘personal escapes’, a range of portable ladders, and double passageways that could be added to existing buildings.⁸ The Royal Society awarded a series of medals for escape prototypes, including the one created by Abraham Wivell in 1836, which was adopted by the London Fire Brigade Service. Wivell’s escape comprised ‘a compound ladder, placed on a pair of high wheels . . . a light frame projecting behind by means of which it may be steered . . . four men are sufficient to run it along the street with considerable rapidity, and to turn it in any direction and place it in a position ready to act’ (see Plate 12.) The escape was mobile and flexible, easily adapting to the building type it was needed for. It also contained ‘a trough of sacking, down which persons who from fear or infirmity cannot come down the ladder, may slide.’ You could slow your progress down the trough by pressing your knees against its edge.⁹

As perilous as Wivell’s escape sounds, the ironwork fixed escapes, which began to be added to existing buildings throughout the 1800s were not without danger, and patent designers were keen to point out that climbing down the outside of a building was probably beyond the capacity of the women, children and servants of a household.¹⁰ Legislation introduced in 1894 required an escape route from the roof in new buildings, but this left dwellers and landlords able to interpret local by-laws until the introduction of a national framework in the 1960s.¹¹ The expense of fire stairs was a concern for new and existing buildings, with the safest escape being completely enclosed with self-closing doors at every exit. Between the 1850s and the 1960s a range of external and additional escapes were proposed, including Bessemer’s fire door, Batten’s automatic balcony, and Ells’ adjustable scaffold.¹² In 1936 Davy are still advertising a version of the automatic, which looks like a small canvas seat, to be operated by a pulley system and thrown out of a window, for one occupant at a time. External ironwork escape stairs are still being advertised in the 1950s by firms such as Farmer, Gardiner and Merryweather.

Fire escapes went from being structures that were moved to and then fixed to buildings, to being part of the buildings they serve. The earliest permanent structures look like (and indeed were) architectural afterthoughts. They were formed by and in response to the city and the dangers that were part of living there. These external escapes are a visible reminder of the fact that architecture, and especially urban architecture, is always the articulation of afterthought. It is piecemeal and palimpsestic, responding to the past and attempting to shape the future. By the 1930s the external fire escape, added as an addition to an existing building, begins to be widely accepted as less safe than internal, fire retardant stairwells.¹³ Criticism of external escapes had preceded these changes: in the United States in 1911, they were described as ‘a makeshift

creation, the cupidity of landlords'.¹⁴ In an English advertisement, from 1951, the external escape is described as vulnerable to rust, weather and fire.¹⁵

Greed, poverty and old buildings worked together to increase the risk of fire throughout the twentieth century in England, with access to safe housing often beyond the reach of low-income households. Landlords oversaw the repeated subdivision of Edwardian and Victorian buildings, creating 'the new style of death trap post-modernism'; a style that allowed them to capitalize on the ability to rent the smallest amount of space to the largest amount of people possible: 'building owners blocked fire escapes to adjoining roofs when they turned hallways into bedrooms.'¹⁶ Stairwells became chimneys when upper-level fire doors were removed. Ladders disappeared.¹⁷ Shifting patterns of energy use can also be used to trace the appearance of fires in this period; households on the lowest incomes were the latest to adopt gas and electricity, instead using dangerous open coal fires. In 1956, 96 percent of [low income households surveyed] were using open coal fires.¹⁸ This account of the escape's development explains something of the escape's external character, even when they are housed within the body of a building. It also reiterates their connection with urban centres, places where large groups of people live and work. The following sections will address the use of these spaces outside the context of fire, beginning in the next section with how the escape alters experiences of the space they serve.

2. Trapdoor

Fire escapes show the envelope of a building to be permeable in a way that is not quite appropriate. They open up the possibility of trapdoors, tripwires and trapeze movements in and around a building, stretching and squeezing space, pushing and pulling people through. The definition of a trapdoor is a door or hatch, usually flush with the surface in a floor, roof, ceiling or theatre stage. The joining of the words 'trap' and 'door' is itself suggestive. The trap to catch game or vermin is a gin, a snare that works on the basis of allowing entry to but not exit from a space. The trapdoor switches the coordinates of the surface it is part of, flush, until it is used and gives way. It is thanks to the trapdoor potential of the fire escape that it enables the home to stray, to realign itself, to swivel or slip. This potential slip is both pleasing and alarming and gives way to the playful appropriation of space discussed in Chapter 2 and the surreal but highly functional manipulation of planes in Chapter 3. This is the play that allows for displacement and refreshment through a certain malleability of borders; the spatial gape. Roland Barthes links the pleasure inherent in this manipulability with 'the kind of pleasure the child takes in wielding his toys, exploring and enjoying them'.¹⁹ The pleasure of the malleable border is exploited over and again in children's literature as well as in cartoons, film and theatre. We can think of the delight taken in the repeating motif of the 'bookcase doorway' or the predilection

of James Bond villains for the hidden trapdoor in the floor, controlled (unbeknownst to the hapless henchman or imprudent hero) by a hidden switch on their desk.

One of the most well-known examples of this is the walnut wardrobe found in an empty room, filled with fur coats and smelling of mothballs, which leads to Narnia.

She soon went further in and found there was a second row of coats hanging up behind the first one. It was almost quite dark in there and she kept her arms stretched out in front of her so as not to bump her face into the back of the wardrobe. She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it. ‘This must be a simply enormous wardrobe,’ thought Lucy, going still further in and pushing the soft folds of the coats aside to make room for her. Then she noticed that there was something crunching under her feet. ‘I wonder is that more mothballs?’ she thought, stooping down to feel it with her hand. But instead of feeling the hard, smooth wood floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold. ‘This is very queer,’ she said, and went on a step or two further . . . A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night time.²⁰

The missing panel of the wardrobe – that hides an opening into a forest – has a real-world corollary. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, the darker, more adult prequel to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Polly and Digory find their way from the attic of her London house into another in the row: ‘Polly had discovered long ago that if you opened a certain little door in the box-room attic of her house, you would find the cistern and a dark place behind it which you could get into by a little careful climbing.’²¹ The architectural defect, of a trapdoor or scuttle, that would allow passage between houses, was encouraged by fire prevention methods in the nineteenth century, where ladders, kept tucked away for the occasion of a fire, connected the roofs.²²

The sensation of feeling for an edge and not finding it, or finding something else in its place, is not an everyday sensation but it is one you might be familiar with. Its invert is the jolt you get when, walking down stairs, the floor seems to arrive too quickly; expecting one step more, you are brought up short with a bump. The trip wire is the inverted trapdoor; one stops you in your tracks with an abrupt start as you meet a boundary you had not seen, the other pushes you along, out, forming a hitherto unseen route further in or outwards. Interaction with either is a tactile experience that takes place in the dark or when we have our eyes closed – we may not literally have our eyes closed but we feel that we know the space so do not pay close attention to it; we are not looking or checking. These are instances when the imagined conception of the space is corrected by experience, instances of bodily learning where the actual asserts itself upon the imaginary



FIGURE 4.2 Bessemer's door to next door. Photographs from his above-mentioned patent (Bedford Press, London: 1895).

or where the imagined and expected does not become actual. These are instances of collision between the real and the unreal even when no collision actually occurs. In the excerpt above, Lucy feels with her hands, the outstretched fingertips which feel for edges embodying a sort of handling and manhandling of a world which has not yet been defined.

Fire escapes have the potential to realign the borders of the home as they redistribute the ways in and out. In a fire, a window can suddenly become a door, a room can become a trap. The escapes and exits that are revealed during a fire or crisis or fire drill open up the possibility of a previously unimagined backstage area to a building. The trapdoor of the fire door spills people out into the street or onto the roofs of adjacent buildings but it can

also spill people further inside, into the bowels of hotels, hospitals or office blocks. This new internal route can reveal the backstage activities which seem to separate buildings and their servicing: cleaning cupboards, store rooms, post rooms and entirely alternative experiences of places you might have thought you knew. For the people who do the servicing, their control over these back stages is halted. It is a disconcerting discovery that reveals a space you had thought of as finite as being a facade that is in some way fabricated (or maintained) by the space beyond it. In Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, movement between the main staircase and the servant's staircase is remembered as a flitting between spaces of permission and transgression, as dreamlike alternation between the secret and the exposed.

The service stairs were next to the main stairs, separated only by a wall, but what a difference there was between them: the narrow back stairs, dangerously unrailed, under the bleak gleam of a skylight, each step worn down to a steep hollow, turned slightly into a steep grey shaft; whereas the great main sweep, a miracle of cantilevers, dividing and joining again, was hung with the portraits of prince-bishops and had ears of corn in its wrought-iron banisters that trembled to the tread. It was glory at least, an escalation of delight, from which small doors, flush with the panelling, moved by levers beneath the prince-bishops' high-heeled and rosetted shoes, gave access, at every turn, to the back stairs and their treacherous gloom. How quickly, without noticing, one ran from one to the other.²³

There is a correspondingly disobedient backstairs glee in the illustrated book *Eloise* by Kay Thompson. Here the eponymous heroine, a six-year-old girl who lives at the Plaza Hotel in New York, delights in her own particular brand of havoc, caused by using the stairwell and the elevators one after the other in quick succession.²⁴ The two-page spread depicting this game, which demands that readers turn the book on its side so that it stands portrait, captures the separate zones of the hotel in a minimal cross-section. The combination of lifts and stairs allows Eloise to create a life size game of Snakes and Ladders. The two means of getting from floor to floor operate at different speeds, so exist in different time zones, Eloise can insert a surreal time lag into the journey of those travelling by lift alone by running in between the two routes.

The buildings that inform each of these examples are designed to accommodate their own servicing: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century residential buildings in London were organized by status vertically, with the poorest at the top, farthest from street-level amenities; the Victorian country house contained passageways, corridors and whole servants' quarters which spread out horizontally, or even underground, to avoid unnecessary contact and to preserve the 'magic' of servants' work for their employers; and the hotel, which cannot function without its staff, moves them in their own lifts, and through service areas, passageways and stairwells.²⁵ What the trapdoor leads to and from in these cases is a scene that appears closed but which in

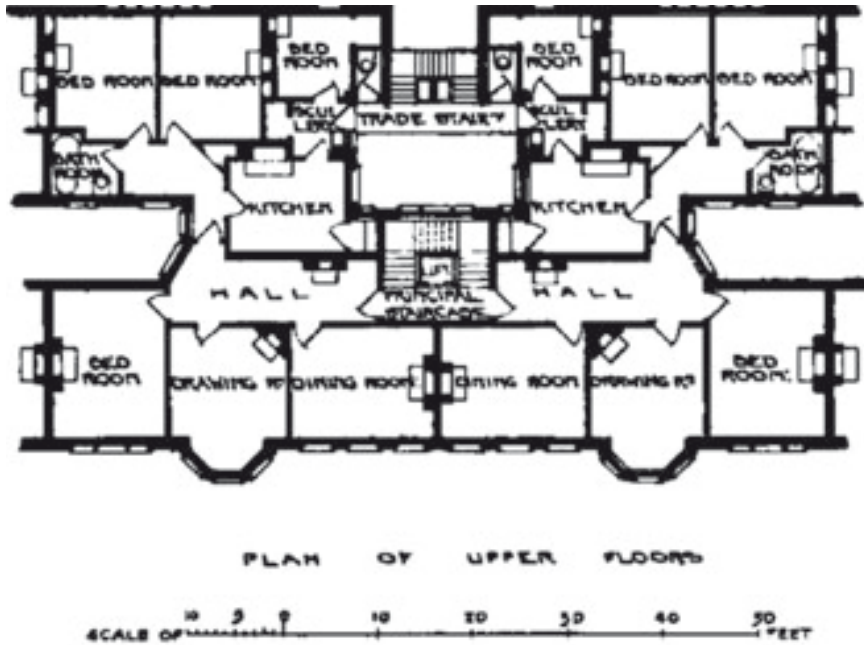


FIG. 37.

FIGURE 4.3 Perk's modern arrangement: servant's room beyond the kitchen. Sydney Perks, *Residential Flats of All Classes Including Artisans Dwellings* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1905).

fact is linked to and dependent on a series of back-stages and other scenes. These separate spaces are organized across lines between types of work and leisure, and possession and tenancy. When Catherine Beecher makes her designs in 1869 for the ideal *servantless* house, she incorporates moving screens, and furniture on wheels, that will allow her to produce the effect of these kinds of spaces, separating the made from the making, the show from its production.²⁶

What is unexpected – and perhaps unwanted – for hotel guests at the fashionable Plaza in the 1950s, confronted (and slowed down) by the knowledge of stairways and services as they ride the elevator, is celebrated by the urban planner James Hobrecht, writing in Berlin in 1862. For Hobrecht, a shared stairwell – one point of access and circulation for everyone using a building – was democratic; there is no trapdoor pleasure at work here, because seeing how other people live, even if only in passing, was ordinary and in its ordinariness, socially improving.

The children from the basement apartments head off to public school through the same hallways used by the children of privy counsellors . . .

all this the result of easy relations among human beings however great their difference in station . . . where a working-class English mother lets her child run around unwashed uncombed and in rags because she has no incentive to expound effort or time on the child's appearance, the mother from a basement dwelling in an apartment house would not think of doing so, for she knows herself to be observed and subject to the disapproval of the better resident.²⁷

English charities agreed. The Peabody Trust's 'associated flats' at Blackfriars, built in 1871, were organized around a central stairwell and shared sanitary facilities to save money but also to benefit from the 'communal scrutiny' of caretakers and tenants. It was hoped that the example of higher-status tenants, who could afford to take three-room flats, would influence the poorer 'one-room' occupants through the shared use of the same stairwell.²⁸ Even in these apparently positive accounts of the spaces, they house experiences of surveillance and observation.²⁹

In Stillman and Eastwick-Field's blocks for the Hereford Estate in Bethnal Green, completed in 1956, the surveillance has a stranger quality (see plate section). From the central stairwell, which a lift shaft with two lifts runs through, walking dwellers can look out from their block to a mirror image opposite. Westhope House faces Kinsham House, and the view is a good one – from each stairwell you can see the entirety of the block you face, returning an image of where you are, even if you aren't to be found in it. Both blocks are ten storeys high, and each contain sixty dwellings. The stairwell splits and joins the two halves, and is fronted on both sides by thick, slightly opaque glass. The vista is peaceful, calming, and a little dislocating. The space between the blocks is wide enough that any sight of another person, also standing still and looking out from the stairwell, would be soundless, it is too far to do anything other than wave. The visual communication between these two large blocks creates a shared knowledge, an intimacy that connects the one to the other. The looking out that is also a reflecting back is at such a scale, and with enough space, that the relationship is one of security rather than claustrophobia.

Hobrecht's egalitarian version of the shared stairwell skirts the edges of another account of a fire escape route, which evokes the space's dubious legal and social characteristics. For Bessemer, writing in 1895, the possibility of joining a series of private houses by doors from one to the other is at once deeply practical and humane, and would make escape from fire a simpler and speedier process. He counters this with a fearful account of what might happen to definitions of property if this was adopted on a wider scale. Before arriving at this picture of disorder he gives a sketch of what these joined-homes might permit, and in doing so describes a set-up that has links to or sews the seedlings of, the anti-nuclear family knocked-through squatted terrace at Tolmer's Square (London, 1970s), the Hackney Flashers (London, 1970s) and Charles Fourier's Phalanstère (France, nineteenth century).

But we must not let this glorious vision of escape from a fearful death close our eyes to the great danger that such a method pure and simple would inevitably entail and which those who have framed the London Building Act of 1894 have very wisely forbidden to be done in such a way as to constitute a *permanent and actual union* of the two houses. But for this necessary law many persons might arrange with their neighbours to unite their houses at various points and for many different purposes, for instance they might do so for the facility of having in common a large ball or concert room, and the first floor dining-rooms might be permanently united by a wide opening made for that purpose in the party wall, or separated only by a large pair of folding doors such as are in common use for uniting the front and back parlours of houses. Again, the largeness of one family might lead to an arrangement with the next-door neighbour, allowing them to unite, by a doorway, some of the spare bed-rooms in the upper part of his house with their own so that, in fact, houses could be so united that a whole terrace of houses might be seriously endangered whenever one of them was on fire.³⁰

What the joined and re-combinable houses threaten is the clarity of property. Is there something politically subversive about the fire escape, then? The central stairwells in Berlin and London accompany the subdivision and multiplication of private dwellings, the imagined series of doors is only possible and necessary with a close-knit series of houses, but the expression of what these spaces do to social relations is distinct. The shared stairwell creates familiarity while preserving the hierarchy that comes with living in one of the one- or two-room flats or ground- and top-floor apartments, as well as with being seen. The series of doorways is more radical, requiring ongoing cooperation and pooling, if not the actual giving and taking, of resources.

The construction of entirely middle-class blocks in London began when lifts, high-pressure water supply and improved ventilation arrived in the course of the 1800s. This meant it was no longer necessary to organize buildings by status vertically as each tenant could access the same services, no matter how high their rooms. Servants were not being dispensed with just yet, however, and new blocks were necessary to house them too, to cater, as Richard Dennis puts it, 'to the round the clock needs of the rich'.³¹ The question of where to put servants in the expanding metropolis was a significant one and in the new mansion blocks you needed to decide whether to house them together, in an attic or upper floor, or within each separate flat. Sydney Perk's 1905 guide, *Residential Flats of All Classes*, suggests that fire escapes made flat-living more attractive to servants who lived in the homes of their employer, as the routes in and out were accessed generally through servants quarters, meaning servants from different flats could visit one another, and leave the building without being observed. One of Perk's illustrations shows the plan for a typical 'modern' arrangement, with the servant's room beyond the kitchen, and the trade or fire route accessible

beyond that (see Figure 4.3.) This licence did not appeal to the mistress of the house, who had less control over these comings and goings than in a private home, though Perks notes there the troubling presence still of a 'back door'.³²

The out-of-sync play that Eloise enjoys by switching between stairwell and lift shaft is also one of the covert joys of the fire drill, which enforces a synchronizing of watches (or worlds) upon groups of people who live and work in isolated spaces and time zones. There is something intensely pleasurable about watching disparate groups of people idle about in awkward company while they wait to hear if the drill was a success. As a temporal exercise the fire drill is anomalous in our day-to-day experience for here is reasonable timetabled delay, sponsored or enforced delinquency. Steven Connor has written that 'fire precaution requires an intensification of regulated movement – clearly marked exits, drills that reduce the random millings and effusiveness of social movements into controlled routines'.³³ But in fact these drills never run smoothly; they are never experienced as regulated or controlled for they cannot lose their innate character, which is chaotic. You are taken out of work and allowed to stand idle, which is not something we find easy to do. The fire drill is meant to catch people unawares and as such the milling crowd assembled at the 'assembly point' is always in a state of not-quite-readiness. They are without coats (due to the insistence that they pick up none of their belongings), they are bleary eyed.³⁴ Whether it interrupts the school or work day, the drill always seems to take longer than it should, and those participating are left with an overall feeling of both inefficiency and anti-climax. The meeting of various time zones can be experienced as a form of jet lag; returning from a fire drill, office workers and school children are both rejuvenated by the break and confused as to how to get back into the time zone they had imagined they were in before. In 1967 Foucault wrote that 'we are in the era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered'.³⁵ The modern ritual of the fire drill practises a juxtaposition of simultaneities that reveals spatial and temporal seams as it temporarily removes them. When I talk about seams like this, I am thinking again of Barthes' image, which he uses to describe the textual gape.³⁶ As in Hilary Knight's cross-sectional illustration of the stairs and elevators at the Plaza Hotel for *Eloise*, there is the sense of various codes or orders working side by side but separately. Eloise's game, like the fire drill, draws them together unexpectedly.

The trapdoor-like effects of the fire escape persist today and even internal escapes retain a certain externality. This is partly by design: they are routes out of buildings, exits from the inside to the outside; they need to be well and cheaply lit so they may be studded with glassless windows or low-level lighting. The fact that they are now permanent fixtures as well as routes creates tension. Most of the anxiety they inspire stems from the fact that any means of exiting a space doubles as a means of entrance; if you can use them to get out, someone can use them to get in. Perks notes that the trade staircase and fire escape 'open up a fresh field for the enterprising burglar',

and advises either a shared single point of entry, with separate stairs inside the building, or that precautions be taken. These include the ‘night latch’ so that access is barred at night to those without a key.³⁷ The more people who share the stairs means more latch keys, with the possibility always present of one getting lost. Even the presence of people who are permitted to use the shared structures, a tradesperson or a firefighter, can be surprising to those in other flats. Notes from a Twitter survey describe the unwanted intimacy the structures can invite, even when used for official or condoned activities.

Woke up and had a heart attack, maintenance man just standing outside my bedroom window on the fire escape. I live on the 6th floor. / No really. I like waking up to men literally next to my face on the fire escape hammering nothing that needs to be hammered. / Man working on my fire escape just asked me if I was planning on taking another shower today.

In each of these examples, the sense is of an extreme invasion of personal space. Each person has had their space violated and the imagery used is suitably corporeal. The first example twins the appearance of a stranger at a window with that of a blood clot in a coronary artery. The hyperbolic phrase ‘had a heart attack’ draws the shock of seeing a man outside a window inside the speaker’s body where it was felt. The second example works with a similarly bodily experience with the man described as being ‘next to my face’. This intimate placement makes it seem as though the man were actually in bed with the speaker, suddenly sharing her pillow and sheets. All three are redolent of horror film imagery; the figure at the window lit by a sudden bolt of lightning, the face at the door with the axe, the dawning realization that you are being watched, or that the call is coming from inside the house. All three also articulate the social hierarchy of service, where part of what is surprising is the sudden visibility of normally unseen and overlooked work.

3. Unmarried women

The schizophrenic nightmare of no filter between inside and outside, seen as urban reality in the tweets about men on fire escapes, has its fantasy inversion in the romantic-comedic plot of serendipitous urban coincidence. Strayed homes, which are by nature makeshift, are often represented in such a way as to fetishize their temporary haphazard untidiness. If the city-dweller feels fixed, trapped in an unending cycle of commute, work and prescribed hours and modes of rest, then the narrative of chance, escape and chaos that representations of subtly permeable domestic settings and scenarios provide is a pleasurable one.³⁸ Fire escapes often hem – or are the backdrop for – narratives about the urban young. Their protagonists can be seen as versions of Lucy handling a world that has not yet been defined, or Polly and Digory happening upon one another by the chance of proximity. The recent frustrated coming-of-age

narratives *Tiny Furniture* (2010) and *Frances Ha* (2012) can also be read as strayed home narratives.³⁹ Both use space to reflect upon themes of fitting in, growing up, and the negotiation of fantasies against realities. Both films' opening scenes show their anti-heroines socializing on fire escapes. In *Tiny Furniture* Aura, played by Lena Dunham, is at a party where she is introduced to a tall, dark and handsome stranger. In *Frances Ha*, Frances, played by Greta Gerwig, is seen sitting on her building's fire escape dangling her legs over its sides, smoking, laughing and talking to her friend Sophie. These images reference a series of fire escape fantasies and recite the idea that they are spaces of bohemian lassitude, serendipitous encounter, and unruly un-rulebound fun; it's worth mentioning that in the opening montage of *Frances Ha* (a montage which is meant to capture the happier days of Frances and Sophie's platonic romance), another of the spaces they enjoy is a laundromat. Of course, neither film takes these fantasies very seriously, they are precisely what they seek to unpick, and the fantasy of serendipitous urban coincidence is shown to be just that. *Tiny Furniture* prefigures this in the handling of the fire escape scene, deflating the bohemian romance of the space by making a play of how awkward it is to climb out of a window in a dress with a room full of strangers watching. To add to this, the stranger Aura meets out on the city-balcony reveals pretty quickly that he doesn't have anywhere to live.

The strain of doubt about the play of a grown-up childhood, exemplified by a series of interactions with den-like spaces, grows as both films unfold. *Tiny Furniture* is the story of what happens when Aura moves back home to live with her mother and teenage sister after finishing college. Clearly having outgrown the role of daughter-at-home but not able to move out, Aura tries to fit herself back into the space of the familial home with little success. The way she places her body in the house is awkward. She strikes a series of childish poses, lies on floors, stands on tables, sits down in the shower and lets Jed (the man she met on the fire escape) sleep in her mother's bed. Things aren't much better outside the house; at one point she finds a cylinder of rolled floor matting, debris from some construction project, and uses it as a secluded spot in which to have sex. Pushing the theme of ungainly growth further we also see her playing with the tiny furniture of the film's title (her mother is an artist who takes pictures of miniature tables and chairs in various locations). Living with other people's furniture, in other people's houses, is dislocating; an inability to own or choose furniture is taken for granted by so many young renters, Dunham picks at the psychological consequences of this here.⁴⁰ In one scene, Aura lies at her mother's feet like an overgrown child while at her head stands a gathering of small yellow sofas and chairs. We can sense the tensions in the decorative control of space for both mother and daughter – each dwarfing the other's plans. The reference to Lewis Carroll's Alice is clear, except that the relationship between home and adventure, between growing up and staying the same size, is skewed; “It was much pleasanter at home,” thought poor Alice, “when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller.”⁴¹

Frances Ha presents the den-making of young adulthood as a series of abrupt unplanned relocations. The film is divided into sections by a series of postal addresses. White writing on a black screen announces each new location, each a place where Frances sleeps. The viewer, like Frances, is given little warning about when these shifts will occur and little explanation as to why. An inability to steady herself for a significant period of time seems to be Frances's problem, and her interactions with the spaces she stays in reflect this. She repeatedly asserts that she is 'not messy just busy' as a way of explaining the conditions of her bed and living rooms. Her rapid drift from place to place is juxtaposed with her inability to shift herself when it is actually necessary; she sleeps through a weekend in Paris, is daunted by the distance between Sophie's bed and her own (a room away) and struggles to leave the house at the weekend. She complains ruefully about her housemate, Lev: 'He's so good at leaving.' In both films, the heroines' experiences of home-space are shown to be disturbed. The fantasy of the childish manipulation of space allowed for by the city and exemplified by the fire escape fantasy is subverted.

Both heroines come from comfortably middle-class families, and the contrast between their insecurity and the security of their parents is stark. It is a mark of how blinkered, or how well trained, both Aura and Frances are, that they look inside themselves for their problems with work and housing rather than toward society at large. The contracting job market and rising housing inequalities that followed the 2008 Global Financial Crisis are implicit, but both characters are chastened by events, and by those around them, to change something about themselves in order to move forward, embodying Brian Elliot's account of the twenty-first-century worker as 'entrepreneur of [her]self . . . the self propelling investor in [her] own happiness'.⁴² Both can be seen to occupy Hannah Summer's 'second stage adolescence', where the gap between teenagehood, and the decisive and secure act of 'homemaking' said to mark the start of adulthood, is extended indefinitely.⁴³ This sense of congealing time, of things taking too long, can be read in both films. Aura's experience is of severe stagnation, akin to a depressive state, while Frances seems to stand still as the world slips around her. She is surprised to find herself in each new rented accommodation, and her increasing isolation seems to take her by surprise too. As unstable and demoralizing as the experience of 'residential alienation' is, the housing charity Shelter noted in 2017 that it is also 'ordinary'.⁴⁴ In these narratives, a lack of control over the space around them is perplexing for the protagonists but somehow inevitable. In these films, hanging out on the fire escape does not lead back towards a secure footing in a new home, instead it leads to the financial dead end of platonic romance, and sexual encounters with insolvent and homeless men.

Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* takes place before any of its younger characters leave the family home. The fire escape is a paradoxical space of relief and claustrophobia, reminding the audience of how perilous a step it will be when they do. Tom shares the apartment with his mother Amanda and sister Laura.

The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is an accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation. The fire escape is included in the set – that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it.⁴⁵

The fact that the fire escape is included in the set reiterates the sense of growing imprisonment felt by Tom's sister, Laura, whose only chance of escape it seems is in the dream of the gentleman caller who will scale its ladder to save her. The implausibility of this fantasy means it comes to play the part of a spectre, reminding the audience only of its absence. Both Tom and Laura harbour no illusions of the rescue actually happening but their mother, Amanda, is convinced and manically tries to fit the fairytale scenario to their small Chicago tenement; 'A fire escape landing is a poor excuse for a porch' (and *Romeo and Juliet* is called upon again). Like *Tiny Furniture* and *Frances Ha*, the narrative is essentially that of a girl and the space she is permitted to be in but unable to take control of. Amanda's deploring speech about Laura – 'It frightens me how she just drifts along' – could easily be applied to Aura and Frances. Laura's delinquent drift from space to space about the city, having given up on her typing course because she was too shy to continue, makes a stark contrast to her predicted future;

Laura It wasn't as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up . . . I went inside the art museum and the birdhouses at the zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glasshouse where they raise the tropical flowers.

Taking from this only that she has failed to complete the course that might have given her a job, Amanda is distraught. She doubles her efforts to find another means of getting Laura out of the house and into another one.

Amanda So what are we going to do for the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position.⁴⁶

For Amanda, the prefix 'unmarried' dismantles the proper meaning of the word 'woman', which is very clearly attached to a place, the home, and a role, wife and mother. Laura's disability, which accounts in part for her shyness, means she is even more vulnerable to the expectations and categories others apply to her. It is clear that physical mobility is not an issue; rather in each of the places she visits, she does not have to interact with people, preferring instead the company of films, birds, and flowers. Within the timescale of the play, Laura is seen trying to leave the house only once, via the fire escape, where she falls and twists her ankle.

A woman who champions both fire escapes and marriage as means of survival is Truman Capote's Holly Golightly. In Capote's 1958 novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and in the 1961 film it inspired, Holly Golightly and her upstairs-neighbour (known as Fred) use the drop-down ladders of the escapes that flank their Manhattan brownstone to flee to the street or to gain easy access to one another's bedrooms. Living in the same building for weeks and being made aware of one another's presence through the buzzing of intercom system locks and speaker boxes, 'Fred' does not actually meet Holly until she arrives one day at his window: "I've got the most terrifying man downstairs," she said, stepping off the fire escape and into the room.⁴⁷ This gesture, with which she moves without invitation from the fire escape to the bedroom of a man she's never met, perfectly encapsulates Holly and the fantasy of the cinematic fire escape. The step from escape through window marks Holly's complete disregard for the space of the home and the rules which govern it. Before Fred meets her, he has to let her into the building (via its buzzer system) countless times because she cannot or does not care to remember her keys. Her inability to keep hold of her keys is only one symptom of her pathological aversion to anything traditionally regarded as homely. The label on her mailbox reads, 'Holly Golightly, Travelling' and she would dismiss the cosy confines of a beautifully decorated apartment in the same way she dismisses Fred's antique palace of a birdcage: 'But still, it's a cage.' Her own apartment stands in a state of makeshift disarray, ready for her to bolt when necessary; 'The room in which we stood (we were standing because there was nothing to sit on) seemed as though it were just being moved into; you expected to smell wet paint.' As befits someone whose willed status is 'travelling', Holly's home is transient. It is on the fire escape that she feels most at home; this is where she relaxes and drops the facade of her everyday fiction. Capote deploys a series of hyphenated couplings of words, which epitomize this willed transience, each of them step over a boundary as they mark it. Her bedroom is described as having a 'camping-out atmosphere', the parties she holds are 'open-windowed', and when Fred eventually has to pack up her apartment so that she can skip town, he carries her 'going-away belongings' down the fire escape.⁴⁸ *Tiffany's* depicts a version of the serendipitous urban coincidence that both *Tiny Furniture* and *Frances Ha* position themselves against. Holly is trying to use sex as a means to survive and gain security, this is one of the reasons (in the novella) that Fred is not a suitable partner – he's poor.

In the un-cinematic city, the trapdoor fantasy is marred by the abruptly unromantic reality of your neighbours. Any secret passage you find, any hidden door, will probably lead into the kitchen or lap of someone you do not want to spend time with (not all of us have Audrey Hepburn living downstairs). The fantasy fire escape narrative is more often than not shaped by the interlacing of the lives of various sets of neighbours. In the fictions cited here the fire escape is a space into which other people's homes and lives stray so it becomes a space of coincidence and a plot device. Before they

meet, 'Fred' glimpses Holly "over the banister", leaning out into the hallway, 'just enough to see without being seen'.⁴⁹ Their unbidden intimacy reflects Pierre Mayol's description of the neighbourhood as that place of coexistence which links dwellers 'by the concrete, but essential, fact of proximity and repetition'.⁵⁰ Bit by bit Holly's proximity allows her neighbour to learn about her, encroaching on her life as her life encroaches on his through the series of permeable borders which lie between them: 'He learns about her from eavesdropping on the fire escape, glancing at the trash she throws out, and flipping through the tabloids she graces as much as by roaming New York with her'.⁵¹ The voyeuristic menace of proximity is embellished in the photomontages, made by David Attie to accompany the original publication of the story in *Harper's* in 1957 (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5). A man, still in



FIGURE 4.4 Watching or being watched, photomontage by David Attie for the publication of Truman Capote's story, 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' in *Harpers*, 1957. Photo by David Attie/Getty Images.



FIGURE 4.5 A menacing presence on the stairs, photomontage by David Attie for the publication of Truman Capote's story, 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' in *Harpers*, 1957. Photo by David Attie/Getty Images.

outside hat and coat, advances up the stairs; another, who could be inside or on a fire escape platform, seems to be taking a picture of whatever lies beyond. There is something frantic about the precise and blurred images. They depict a frenetic, peopled set of scenes that are threatening as the montage creates the effect of movement while obscuring the identity of the advancing or watching figure. The relationship between interior and exterior, private and public space, is shown to be permeable and thinly guarded.

The narratives discussed here, which use the fire escape as an occasional backdrop, foil and symbol, present the stability of a home as something to be achieved, and that if taken for granted, gets further out of reach. The fire escape makes this a material reality, and acts as a symbol for the romance of this precarious position. The stories allow or contradict this symbolism.

4. Theatre box

In the city the thing that lurks beyond the facade, the unknown entity behind the hidden door, is other people and their simultaneously lived lives. The voyeuristic impulse is a definite feature of the fire escape narrative and its everyday companion eavesdropping. The imperfect permeability of inside to out is the main theme of that other fire escape narrative, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, which sees L.B. Jeffries (played by James Stewart) using his camera as a 'portable keyhole' to delve further in to the lives of his neighbours.⁵² It is imperfect because he can only see what happens when windows are open and curtains drawn. *Rear Window* opens with the slow striptease of rising window-blinds. The three blinds of Jeffries' apartment window peel back in tantalisingly unhurried counterpoint to the frenzied syncopated rhythm of the opening credits jazz overture. Through the three frames of the window we can see (bit by bit) other eye-avenues and peep-shows; fire escapes, alleyways, ladders, balconies, windows, all thrown wide open to combat the summer heat. Through these unwitting lenses we see a man putting on a tie, a couple asleep on a fire escape, a girl facing her mirror tying up her hair, and in the small slit that leads out onto the road, a milk van. We are looped into the radio frequency and hear mixed broadcasts of music and advertisements, alarm clocks and morning conversations. The scene is familiar and domestic, referencing a multitude of morning rituals and routines; the viewer looks at and listens to a discordant but recognizable urban dawn chorus. The camera pulls back on itself, behind the original three panes and into the apartment they belong to. Here we find Jeffries in his 'plaster cocoon', ravaged by the heat, itching to be out of this 'swamp of boredom.' Jeffries is rooted to the spot, stuck in two plaster casts, having recently broken both his legs in a race-car explosion. This enforced stasis allows Hitchcock to create a modern version of what Barthes calls 'the tragic stage.'⁵³ In this modern tragic stage, the subject waits, but he also spies. The film casts the fire escape as one in a series of structures, which invite an unseemly voyeurism articulating the guilty tension that works between looking and being looked at. Stella, who visits the apartment to nurse Jeffries puts this into words; 'we've become a race of peeping toms, what people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change'. The denouement of the film will make this a terrifying reality when the murderer, who Jeffries has been spying on without his knowledge, looks back into his (Jeffries') apartment. The opening scene of *Rear Window* makes a visual spectacle of eavesdropping – a spaced-out version of the kind of sociable inference and influence of other people, described by Hobrecht in Berlin in 1862.

To eavesdrop is to *listen secretly*, originally by standing beneath the eaves of a house.⁵⁴ Moving from the fictional 'I spy. . .' of *Rear Window* to the actual 'I spy. . .' of Twitter, we can trace the remains of a tradition of voyeurism and exhibitionism that is still taking place on and around fire

escapes. On the day my survey was conducted, there were two remarkable fires in the news (a house fire in Streatham and a factory fire in Karachi).⁵⁵ The ‘mentions’ of fire escapes on the social networking site were still predominantly (over 80 per cent) focussed on the other uses of the structures, i.e. those which had nothing to do with escaping from a conflagration. I have made a list of key words and phrases from the Tweets below.

Hang out / Accident / Workmen / Blocked off / Slip out / Fall off / Perch
Overlooking / Contemplate / In bras / Drinking / Weed / Be myself / Get
away / Singing to myself / Barefoot / Phoneless / Chilling / Balcony / Briefs
no shirt / Sneak down

The overwhelming sense is that these are spaces of leisure, but of a leisure which is also somehow a form of disobedience. From one of the most repeated phrases, ‘hang out’, we can discern an expansive and insouciant release of tension. The phrase sets up a mirrored relationship between the structures themselves and the people who are using them. The structures ‘hang out’ from the buildings they are attached to and the users of the space feel the liminal pleasures of being simultaneously part of and separate from the building they live in and the streets it overlooks. There is a wavering in the phrase between the droop and declivity of ‘hang’ and the spreading and reaching of ‘out’. ‘Hanging out’ embodies this sense of luxuriating and abandon; the delinquency is an indulgence. The phrase also leads us back to the exposed intimacy of washing lines upon which clothes are hung to dry. People repeatedly report sightings of strangers in their underwear or revel in their own state of semi-undress. We can note the development in the things that make people feel undressed – being phoneless is aligned with nakedness and exposure in 2014, but also escape.

Like ‘Fred’ in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, these urbanites tread a tightrope between exhibitionism and voyeurism, leaning out ‘just enough to see without being seen.’⁵⁶ Like Jeffries, they take pleasure in spying and hope that they cannot be spied on. This makes the escapes theatre boxes of sorts, where visibility is enjoyed between different positions of exposure – the box is exposed but it can be stepped back into. In Chapter 3, I wrote that a voyeur is someone who derives sexual stimulation from the covert observations of others, or someone who observes without participating. The space of the fire escape, like that of the train, forces the position of voyeur onto those who use them and those who watch others. If you are on an external escape, you can look at the world at a remove; you can watch but not participate. From the ground, or window, if you see people on a distant escape you are similarly removed. They are stage-like spaces in this regard, calling attention to what happens in them but without inviting participation.

In Capote’s novella the site of the fire escape is both route in and out, and also a strayed home, where Holly sits and feels safe. It functions as a similarly un-policed and secret space for daydreams and assignations in Robert Wise

and Jerome Robbins' MGM musical *West Side Story*. In the dreamy back alley scene where Tony (played by Richard Beymer) sings a song of teenage wistfulness, the alley is lit by sunset colours, dusky pinks and blues that are more redolent of fairytale castles and negligée than city streets. The light is crepuscular and the structures are crepuscular too; hovering ladders looking ready to detach themselves from the brick walls they are insecurely anchored to, as though they might drift off into the sky (see plate section). The scene informs the fantasy of the escape that is resisted or reworked by Dunham and Baumbach. The unmarried women Laura, Aura, Holly and Frances, are joined in *West Side Story* by those other figures who haunt the fire escape, and thus the image of the contained and idealized home; immigrant families and young working-class men. For the black and Puerto Rican families who made up the majority of Upper West Side tenement dwellers, the promise of a secure home was more of a mirage than to the young, precariously housed single woman of the 2000s. These families were locked out of home-ownership by law, and when the law changed in 1968, predatory salesman, developers and banks worked together to force sales where neither housing nor the finance used to pay for it was safe.⁵⁷ The use of fire escapes in the tenements throughout the twentieth century was as extensions of overcrowded, and often dilapidated, housing. Fire prevention was a visible sign of landlord legality, but inside the tenements conditions were dire, rats were a persistent and untreated problem. *West Side Story's* raucous castigation of the American dream, the song, 'I Want to Be in America' sees Anita (played by Rita Moreno) and her boyfriend Bernardo (played by George Chakiris) dance to a couplet of lyrics expressing the ideal of America – space – and the reality of living and work opportunities there for many: 'Doors in your face in America.'⁵⁸ The quotation the fire escapes make, amputated as symbol by Joe Caroff's design for the musical's poster, is of a precarious place in a precarious world – both the film and the use of escapes means that this it becomes an image of fantasy and tragedy.

Read in this way, there is an uneasy tension between the sites the escape-as-symbol quotes – one is a balcony from a theatre from a play about star-crossed lovers, the other is a set of living conditions that are unsafe, where fire is made more likely and lethal by the combination of crowding, low incomes and deliberately hostile tenancies. One is a dream and the other is a rock. The need for more living space and better living conditions, as well as the evident inequality in access to these things, complicates the image taken by the photographer Arthur Wellig, known as Weegee, in 1941, of a group of children apparently asleep on their fire escape balcony.⁵⁹ On the one hand, there is charm and innocence in the unabashed and pre-sexual collusion of bodies: the sought and found peace of sleep, and in the transformation of streetscape to bed. On the other, if we recall the voyeuristic and exhibitionist anxieties and fantasies of *Rear Window*, it becomes apparent that the ability to fashion narratives out of these spatial and social anxieties is something granted by social class. Georges Perec writes "Italian"

beds are only to be found in fairytales (Tom Thumb and his brothers, or the seven daughters of the ogre for example) or in altogether abnormal and usually serious circumstances'.⁶⁰ The normal circumstance for more than two people sharing a bed is a lack of space in the home. Weegee's image casts its viewer in the role of the parent or ogre, looking down upon an unaware collection of sleeping subjects. The viewer is implicated in ogre/parental feelings of tenderness, protection and care. The space only exaggerates this enveloping viewpoint. It is lopsided, cut up by washing line and pole, leaking out past ladders and into the building through an open window (out of which pour yet more children). The only firm 'edge' is that of the shelf-bed on which they lie which, in its crowded state, seems perilous. Perceps brings together fairytales and 'abnormal' or 'serious' circumstances. These are times when normal rules do not apply, when edges and boundaries begin to blur. The summer weather has forced the home to spread out onto the balconies, onto any surface that can be found. The collision of dream and rock is uncomfortable, though the home, as site of so many fairytales, always contains the possibility of danger.

Arthur Miller writes nostalgically about the hottest summers of his youth, remembering a time when weather conditions could realign the contours of a city, before the demands of home cooling systems meant that gaps, windows and doors were stopped up to keep in the cool air. During one particularly sweltering summer, 'every window in New York was open'.⁶¹ It was not just the heat that allowed children to sprawl out across the fire escape; social class, which organized space inside the buildings, played its part too.

People on West 110th Street, where I lived, were a little too bourgeois to sit out on their fire escapes, but around the corner on 111th and farther uptown mattresses were put out as night fell, and whole families lay on those iron balconies in their underwear . . . Even through the night, the pall of heat never broke. With a couple of other kids I would go across 110th to the Park and walk among the hundreds of people, singles and families, who slept on the grass, next to their big alarm clocks, which set up a mild cacophony of the seconds passing, one clock's tick syncopating with another's.⁶²

Miller and Weegee's depictions of city night time in the heat flirt with the surreal undercurrent that accompanies many representations of strayed homes. This is the point at which the boundaries that it bends threaten to be breached completely. Both are reminiscent of the nightmare chaos of sleeping bodies in the third class compartments of the night train and Dali could have painted Miller's park, full of bodies and strewn with clocks. In Miller's remembering, the prosaic gives rise to the surreal as hundreds of time-conscious sleepers sleep with alarm clocks next to their heads to make sure they get to work on time in the morning. In Weegee's series of sensational



FIGURE 4.6 The ogre's children. 'Heat Spell; Children sleeping on the fire escape, the Lower East Side', Weegee (Arthur Fellig), New York, 23rd May 1941, gelatin silver plate. © International Center of Photography. Photo by Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/International Center of Photography/Getty Images.

photographs, the surreal is sewn into the everyday, and he means to provoke emotions of shock and tenderness, to alarm and to show something recognizably troubling about 'the lousy tenements and everything that went with them'.⁶³ Recalling the elongated threshold of the *eruw*, the temporarily altering surfaces of washing hung out to dry, and the bags of clothes taken to and from the home, the fire escape that is used or mis-used for reasons of expediency alters the cityscape or residential block in a way that is felt by those around it. The fire escape is a potentially transformative space signalling, if not actually producing, pliable and instable skylines for those who live in the city. For those who already go without stability on a daily basis it is just as precarious, though they may not be permitted to read it this way.⁶⁴

5. Left space

The early escape ladders and routes of London were made to create a fast route out of a space that was no longer safe to be in. This of course is what escape doors and routes are designed for now. However, these spaces, which are to be used only in the event of an emergency, tend to be slow (if not static) parts of the buildings they are attached to. They are not spaces of rush or flow; their everyday use is paused, held still, waiting. The effect of their presence within buildings is like that of waiting rooms on train platforms or lifeboats on cruise ships, they work to a different time scale and gesture to a potential (unwished for) future. But they are not necessarily dead spaces, because their designated use is on hold, the way they are used depends entirely on the person or group who uses them. Like the laundry room in Thomas Beller's Manhattan apartment block, the fire escape is an aspect of a building's design which is somehow excessive to function. It is its very uselessness that gives it this excessive potential. Excessive to function (out of the order that governs the rest of the building) also means free of prescriptive function; the fire escape is full of possibilities. Because their designated function is on hold the way they are used in the meantime is always a misuse, involving some form of appropriation or invention. I'm aligning this misuse with the tactical practices discussed by Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol in *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2: Living & Cooking*. They write that the city is poeticized by the subject. To poeticize is not necessarily to elevate or make beautiful; rather it is to interpret in such a way as to alter. It is a linguistic act that subverts its subject. It is an unpacking of subjective experience that has the effect of eroding an objective one. It is this interpretation of the poeticizing act that I think Mayol must be alluding to when he says that the city is poeticized by the subject. The city is interpreted, subverted and re-appropriated by its subjects. Mayol writes that 'the subject refabricates it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and imposing their own law on the external order of the city'. It is the subversive qualities of this act that aligns it with the use and interpretation of fire escapes.

The escape is open to interpretation because of its emptiness – it is not unprogrammed but as I have written, that programme is often ignored or forgotten about. The empty escape or stairwell allows projection, disassociation and interpretation. Working like dead metaphors in the text of the cityscape, they are familiar but divorced from their original meaning or design. The way people look at, pass by, use and misuse the fire escape is akin to when we skip or gloss over an unfamiliar or over-familiar word or phrase in a text. They are naturalized like language, gesture and practice in the eyes of Barthes, Perec and Certeau. Fire escapes lend themselves to this treatment partly because they are all edges, they are places of absence staged by presence, an emptiness made significant (or not as the case may be). Whether old-fashioned appendages to buildings or the more familiar modern

spaces of hollowed out internal stairwells, they are and people strive to keep them, empty. The fire escape is unusual as a space because it is, for the most part, unused (most days, there is no fire drill). This lack of use is what puts it in a different time zone to that of the buildings it is part of or attached to. Like out-of-date objects, it becomes a little wild and untethered. Writing about the urban planning that took place in Paris during the 1970s, Certeau described the presence of old buildings in the newly renovated and regenerated areas of the city: 'These seemingly sleepy, old-fashioned things, defaced houses, closed-down factories, the debris of shipwrecked histories still today raise up the ruins of an unknown, strange city. They burst forth within the modernist, massive, homogenous city like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious language. They surprise.'⁶⁵

The fire escape is a strayed home because, like the *eruw*, it is an extension of the home. However, unlike the *eruw*, the launderette and the sleeper train, the fire escape does not only bring the privacy of the home out, it also troubles the privacy of the individual dwelling. It is outside space, tacked onto or threaded through an interior, but it is also shared space, mixing the households it connects and serves. Like the gossipy laundress who went from household to household the fire escape does not heed what is normally guarded by walls and locked doors. The fire escape makes trouble for the boundaries of property. The door in the party wall creates the ultimate spatial gape, and the photographs that accompany Bessemer's pamphlet could have been created by Dora Mar (see Figure 4.7). The fire escape is the strayed home *closest* to the home, and because of this, it acts back on the home most strangely. The reason Bessemer gives, beyond that of protection from fire, for not simply joining rows of terrace houses by moveable walls and doors, is the way this would play havoc with property. The appearance in fire escape narratives of unmarried women can be explained by the fact that they too trouble the behaviour and limits of property, at least if viewed through sexist and historic understandings of marriage and family. The potential for interpretation the spaces contain is problematic here too – they are too undefined.

Fire exits, stairwells and escapes are oddly un-administered spaces. Part of a building's design that is (for the most part) excessive to function, they are spaces where waste or excess can turn to potential. As you walk through the city, you will see people use them as storage space, as back gardens, as spaces in which to hang washing or keep bikes. More variable interpretations occur in the spaces that are still designated as escapes (so must be kept clear of clutter). These misuses cannot be anything but temporary so the spaces are reinterpreted time and again. They are used as hiding places, vantage points, places to drink, sleep, smoke, take drugs, have sex, escape, and hide in. Fire drills are like little *dérives* in the working day. The space of the fire escape can be read as wasted space; the drill is in many ways a waste of time. It is this quality of waste which, because it is unstable, disorderly and un-administered, allows for subjective appropriation, subversion and for the

possibility of poeticizing the city. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the wish-fulfilment-like quality of so much of the work produced by the French architecture practice Lacton and Vassal. Their retrofitted buildings appear to extend the space inside without taking up space outside, whole facades cling to the building, habitable, secure, unprogrammed and transparent. These left spaces bring together two aspects of the fire escape discussed here, its role as problematically owned, and the fact that it can be ignored. Lacton and Vassal perform magic, extending the house into the air – taking up space without appearing to take space away (see plate section). In the narratives discussed, fire escapes seem to belong to a collection of semi-relict objects and spaces, which allow for a similar incursion, sites of potential coincidence (like the sleeper train and the launderette). The fire



FIGURE 4.7 Open door in the party wall: Bessemer's surrealism. Taken from his patent (Bedford Press, London: 1895).

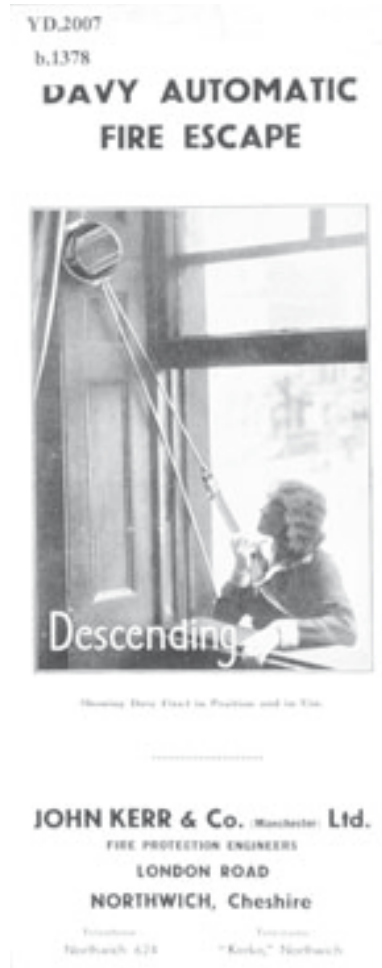


FIGURE 4.8 Descending with Davy's automatic escape (1936).

drill is an experience of coincidence (far more temporary than that of the sleeper train or even the launderette) and the escape is a porous space that inserts a degree of instability into the sealed off simultaneities of other lives in the city. Escapes have moved from the outside of the building, temporary, unfixed, adjustable and somewhat vulnerable, to being inside. But they still retain troublesome attributes, spatially, socially, and legally. Negotiating the presence of left space, within the everyday life of a building or city, necessarily means transgressing categories of use and appropriate or condoned behaviour. Their history collides fantasy with reality, and their effect on the homes they serve remains problematic and full of possibilities.

Notes

- 1 The film was adapted from the musical, first produced in 1957.
- 2 ‘Tony and Maria sing on a fire escape because they are in love in the United States of America, and only in the United States of America do you find fire escapes.’ Thomas A.P. Van Leeuwen, ‘Iron Ivy’, *Cabinet*, 32, Winter 2008–2009, <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/32/vanleeuwen.php>.
- 3 G.V. Blackstone, *A History of the British Fire Service* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 122–3.
- 4 There were 180 fire stations in London in 1895. In 1893 there were 3,410 fires; lives were lost in forty-five of these. A. G. Bessemer, *On the dangers and difficulties inseparable from the methods at present employed in rescuing persons from dwelling houses when on fire* (London: Bedford Press, 1895), 7–8.
- 5 C.A. Brown, ‘Memories of Mile End’, www.mernick.org.uk (accessed December 2013)
- 6 Report made by Mr. Daniel Whittle Harvey and Mr. James Braidwood, *London Standard*, Thursday 22 October 1840.
- 7 Stamatis Zografos, ‘Architecture on Fire’, *Architecture and Fire: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Conservation* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 124–62.
- 8 Jennifer Blair, ‘Fire Escape’, *Victorian Review*, Spring 2008, 52–6.
- 9 *Transactions of the Society instituted at London for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce*, 1838–9, *Mechanics*, No. XII, Fire Escape, 270–4.
- 10 Bessemer.
- 11 *Tower Block: Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (Hong Kong: Yale University Press, 1993), 62. B.G. Phillips, *Escape from Fire: Methods and Requirements* (London: Spon, 1951).
- 12 Batten automatic balcony patent, 1887, Ell’s adjustable scaffold, 1846.
- 13 Phillips, *Escape from Fire Methods*, 118.
- 14 Elizabeth Mary André, *Fire Escapes in Urban America: History and Preservation*, thesis submitted to the University of Vermont, 2006.
- 15 Phillips, *Escape from Fire Methods*, i.
- 16 Readers will be thinking about the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in London in 2017 in which seventy-one people died. Grenfell was fitted with one internal escape stairwell, in accordance with the regulations. I recommend reading Stamatis Zografos and Alistair Cartwright on the legal, ethical and architectural dimensions of the case, and of course the work of Justice4Grenfell who are campaigning for accountability, <https://justice4grenfell.org/>.
- 17 Alistair Cartwright, ‘The Fire Last Time’, *Jacobin*, June 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/grenfell-fire-gentrification-real-estate-neglect>
- 18 Lynda Nead, ‘As snug as a bug in a rug: Postwar housing, homes and coal fires’, *Science Museum Group Journal*, Spring 2018, issue 9, DOI: 10.15180/180902

- 19 Roland Barthes, 'Paris not Flooded', *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (London: University of California Press, 1997), 33.
- 20 C.S. Lewis *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1998), 15–16.
- 21 C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: HarperCollins, 1980), 12–13.
- 22 Sara E. Wermiel, 'No Exit: The Rise and Demise of the Outside Fire Escape', *Technology and Culture*, April 2003: 258–84.
- 23 Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004), 263.
- 24 Kay Thompson, *Eloise* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 6.
- 25 Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 226. Olive Cook, 'The servants quarters with their backstairs, stairs for the female and stairs for the male staff . . . were planned so that no member of the family or guest should see or meet a servant without design', *The English Country House* (London: Thames & Hudson 1974), 218.
- 26 Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1869), 32.
- 27 James Hobrecht, *Gesundheitspflege*, 16, cited by Andreas Bernard, *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*, trans. David Dollemayer, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 180–1. In fact, any attention paid to working-class autobiographies from the same period undoes Hobrecht's rhetorical point and suggests that whether they lived in row terraces or vertical apartments, people were very careful of their appearance if they thought others could see.
- 28 Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 228.
- 29 In this way they echo the functioning of the corridor in the nineteenth-century tenements of New York and Philadelphia, described by Saidiya Hartman: 'the hallway is where the authorities post the tenement-house laws and the project rules . . . It is inside but public . . . It won't be photographed from the inside until decades later'. *Beautiful Lives Wayward Experiments* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), 22–3.
- 30 Bessemer, *On the dangers and difficulties*, 17.
- 31 Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 226.
- 32 Sydney Perks, *Residential Flats of All Classes Including Artisans Dwellings* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1905), 44.
- 33 Steven Connor, 'Building Breathing Space', <http://www.stevenconnor.com/bbs/> (accessed June 2014).
- 34 In one of James Braidwood's reports to the Royal Society, we find mention of firefighters' access to conflagrations being blocked by people inside the building trying to bring their furniture out, which gives some context to this instruction.
- 35 Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces', *Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology*, ed. J. Faubion, series ed. P. Rabinnow, trans. R. Hurley et al (Allen Lane, London: 1998) p.175.
- 36 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), 10.
- 37 Perks, *Residential Flats of All Classes*, 165.

- 38 This is one of the organizing themes of the NBC sitcom *Friends* (1994–2004).
- 39 *Frances Ha*, dir. Noah Baumbach (ICF Films, 2012); *Tiny Furniture*, dir. Lena Dunham (ICF Films, 2010).
- 40 Research into the global phenomenon of ‘generation rent’, makes clear that ‘at its core decorating and maintaining a home is about exercising agency, expressing one’s sense of self in creative ways, and engaging in self care. To suppress the ability to decorate and maintain a home to a decent standard is, therefore, to suppress one’s self’. Kim McKee, Adriane Mihela Soarita & Jennifer Hoolachan, ‘“Generation Rent” and the emotions of private renting: Self-worth, status and insecurity amongst low-income renters’, *Housing Studies*, November 2019.
- 41 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 33.
- 42 Brian Elliott, ‘Work, Culture and Play in the Neoliberal Condition’, *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 21, 2018: 1279–92.
- 43 Hannah Summers, ‘A Regression in Leisure: Work, Play in 21st Century London’, essay submitted to London Metropolitan University for the degree MArch, 2019.
- 44 McKee, Soarita & Hoolachan, ‘Generation Rent’.
- 45 Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 3.
- 46 Williams, Act 1. Scene 1. ll.84–100, Act 1. Scene 2. ll.10–15.
- 47 Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (London: Penguin, 1988), 21.
- 48 Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, 16, 53, 31, 51, 61, .95.
- 49 *Ibid*, 16.
- 50 Pierre Mayol, ‘The Neighbourhood’, *Practice Vol. 2.*, 8.
- 51 Ingrid Norton, ‘My Year with Short Novels: Breakfast at Sally Bowles’, *Open Letters Monthly* <http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/short-novels-breakfast-at-sally-bowles/> (accessed March 2012).
- 52 *Rear Window*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1954).
- 53 Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.
- 54 *SEOD*, 791.
- 55 Twitter survey, made by the author, 14 September 2012 and 16 October 2020.
- 56 Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, 16.
- 57 Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, ‘Predatory Inclusion’, *n+1*, Fall 2019.
- 58 *West Side Story*, book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, 1957. All rights reserved.
- 59 ‘Heat Spell: Children sleeping on the fire escape, the Lower East Side’, Weegee (Arthur Fellig), New York, 23rd May, 1941, Gelatin sliver plate, © International Center of Photography.
- 60 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999), 16.

- 61 Arthur Miller, 'Before Air Conditioning', *The New Yorker*, 22 June 1998, <http://www.newyorker.com/1998/06/22/> (accessed March 2012).
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Weegee, *Bomb*, July 1987. Transcript of a recording of the photographer.
- 64 'Many people experience their housing as just another precarious place in an insecure world', David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 55.
- 65 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol. 2.*, 133.