

Other Places



A storied proposal about architecture as a democracy of institutionalised reification, a ritual rite of private engagement with the imagination, in which space-artefacts are designed and built which exist in total isolation from the human gaze, and which together, over time, rebuild through the concerted re-appropriation of technology, through the means of man's creations, the mystery and allure of the unknowable which once resided in the unfathomable extent of the now miniscule, choking, thinning natural world around us.

I realised some-time after the adventure that it is something one simply has to do as a child, a sort of right-of-passage, a coming-of-age. You slip through the barriers set up by all the conventions which surround that beguiling taboo that is the Other places (that taboo which in turn girdles our cities as tightly as did our old ring of suburbs), and find something more wondrous than speculation. Those Other places which we always grew up being warned about, and yet could do nothing but endlessly speculate on, those places which were fashioned so alluringly in their inapproachability, their possible wonder, they became so big in our minds, so important for both our communally fabricated childish, ghostly and ghoulish mythologies, as well as for our developing sense of independence and accompanying intrepid curiosity, that their pull was entirely irresistible. The delicious tickle of fear induced by the tales we had all whipped out of thin air to further mystify whatever caverns lay beyond the dark entrances; the transgressive thrill which swamps any such experience with the power of having circumventing rules laid down by parents and society, together with the pre-eminence and respect amongst classmates that would be obtained, meant that sooner or later such an undertaking was inevitable for any group of kids with any inclination to adventure and imagination whatsoever.

And, at one stage or another, most did: however when living at that age, with the classroom as your only source of news, it was difficult to gauge where one stood in relation to others. Facts are fluid, especially at that age, and just as we would invent, often from the most meagre scraps of half-heard fragments of sentences grabbed whilst listening in on our parents' dinner conversations, completely ludicrous tales about what occurred beyond the Breaches, so we would all invent, normally with no basis in reality other than whatever truth can be conferred by the avidity of a disclosure, impossible adventures that we ourselves had made into those forbidden places. I believe that before any of us had even so much as peeked across a Breach, we had all filled the classroom with a complex history of our own experiences adventuring beyond where we had yet to look. Of course believable corroboration could not function across the span of a group of twenty-five eleven year olds, and so the class was split into several 'clans', each of which maintained the truth of a specific set of proven 'facts' about what was beyond, clinging to each other's stories with a few shared elements in order to authenticate the group as a whole.

Pretty soon these stories became rather wild, and came to involve all the dramatic flourishes, fantastic embellishments, and histrionic complexity brought about by the need to keep inspiring others in the group, as well as for each group to continue gathering awe and respect from the others in the class. Scaffolding hovering tenuously over cascading waterfalls which could not be seen in the immense darknesses beyond the Breaches, only heard through the roar of their falling waters, and felt through the shaking they induced in the metal frames; creatures that followed you wherever you went, their eyes being one with the walls, and their bodies separated by your presence, only ever partially seen, flitting this way and that, prowling around you, marking time until your departure, watching so that you go no farther than destiny has allotted to your journey;

rooms full of whispering adults, dressed in riotous clothes which more than made up for their oral restraint, and which this world has not seen the likes of since the mineral and fiduciary wealth of whole continents was transposed into the garments of kings-cum-gods; tales to put any theme park to shame, and to a degree of elaboration and mystical atmosphere that no real experience could ever compare, let alone correspond.

They may have been beautiful, and fun, but these edifices of our imaginations grew too labyrinthine, too fantastical, to a point at which they became a burden to maintain, and within our group we began to only half-heartedly believe each other: we needed the solid bond of assurance that would come from an actual voyage beyond a Breach. We held off for a long time, maybe almost a year. I think there was a combination of the silent fear that whatever we experienced would not live up to our fictions, and the terror that if we did make the journey, we would not be believed, since we had cried wolf so many times, and our previous cries would probably have been so much more seductive than the real thing. There would also be the moment as we stepped over, when we would have to simultaneously drop any pretences we had maintained up until that point, of having passed similar ways before, the moment at which our storied edifice would collapse. It was necessary, a worthwhile sacrifice, a point of maturation that had to be reached in which actions consume words, and real experiences silence daydreams; and besides, we were not sure who else in our class had made the journey, and how could we let ourselves be beaten, let ourselves be eaten up by the jealousy induced by the speculation that we were less brave than other people?

We had all been told, with serious airs and concerned frowns, that we must not venture across any Breaches. At school and at home it was explained, in terms which bound us in a terrible contract of guilt and conscience, that the boundaries between the Other places and our streets were called Breaches not because they were mistakes or ruptures between the two, but because they existed in order to test people's strength of respect for the grave importance society placed on the need for the Other places to be unseen and untouched. They were there so that they *might* be crossed, but crossing them was the most damaging act you could put between you and society as a whole: you would be breaching the very contract between individual and nation that has kept the country sane. The Breaches were there to maintain the potential for the Other places to be seen and entered, notionally, thereby heightening the sense of their presence and reality, but to actually cross them was seen as a profound failure, a breach of trust, a sad act.

But we did. And I think we were meant to. Nobody ever explained to us what they had to do with sanity, or even what they were, only some vague ying and yang stuff, nothing terrifying, or even systemically important enough to instil the fear of God in us of transgressing. Only the power of taboo. The fear of the unknown and guilt. Terrible in its own way, but not a force I would daresay that has ever been strong enough to restrain youth, in any form. While I never went back across again, and I don't think anybody else did either, I cannot believe from the

change it affected in me and my friends, and the lifelong commitment and participation in the perpetuation of the Other places which that “transgression” engendered, that the need to cross a Breach and enter an Other place is in fact not a necessary, in-built part of the system. As I said at the beginning, I believe it to be an unsaid, but entirely necessary, almost mandatory, and probably universal rite of passage.

Most things that we didn’t understand the reasons for we speculated as being related to the Other places, from them somehow encapsulating and containing sexual activities, to their being places of punishment or of poverty (at one stage I thought they were where these mysterious “taxes” that everyone always talked about were hidden). Some of us believed in one speculation, others in another, but we were united in the instinctive certainty that they definitely had something to do with what every adult seemed to hide from us every evening, every weekend, in their attics, studies, garages and bedrooms. Without exception our parents, or whoever our guardians were, would leave us alone each evening as they would retreat to a room of their own, shrouded in the same solemn demeanour as when they would tell us about the gravity and importance of respecting the Breaches. This daily hour or two, and the respectful privacy that was expected by the adults to be its companion, was somehow composed of the same weighty material, the same mysterious, hidden atmosphere, as the Other places and the stern hardness they seemed to always produce in our parents’ faces. We were expected to behave ourselves whilst leaving our parents in peace, but again this void, like the void in our cities that the Breaches encircled, was tantalising and impossible not to see as a challenge to our faculties of mischief and enquiry.

Some of us, of course including me, had managed to catch lateral glimpses in ours and other of our friends’ homes, momentary flashes of piles of colourful shapes, odd images on computer screens, chunks of material of indecipherable origin, seen through keyholes in the rooms to which the adults withdrew. We mentioned fleetingly to each other the oddly coloured crystals, the hieroglyphic drawings of unfathomable shapes, and the mess of what looked like votive stage-sets that we thought we had seen, but we did not talk about it too much. We were less inclined to hypothesize with each other about what our own parents were doing in our own homes, it was too real, too personal for us to feel that we could be entirely whimsical with our thoughts and free without tongues at school. We left all conjecture hanging with an open, but oddly certain, surmised that whatever they were doing was related to whatever was beyond the Breaches, and it was most probably some kind of devotional act, of worship, or of appeasement.

Whatever it was that our parents were paying homage to, whatever it was that had something to do with their mental well-being, was across the Breaches, which were everywhere. Every other street had one, and the closer you came to the edges of the city, where I lived, the more there were. They didn’t look particularly odd, just like boarded-up openings in plain concrete walls, the shape of the openings being sometimes regular, sometimes as if something had smashed through a wall, but always filled with a patchwork of chipboard panels

and corrugated sheets imperfectly sealing the un-walled expanse. What was strange was how they proliferated, multiplied, without any sign of construction. Sometimes a wall with a Breach in it would appear between two houses, and then over a period of several months a cubic geology of concrete forms would spread backwards from it, away from the road, between allotments, pressing up against the sides of buildings. Other times a similar voluminous mass would arrive from elsewhere with the steady march of a dull glacier, and as it reared up against the roads, unable to go any further, would tear apart, opening up a Breach as if it had been a piece of fabric steadily filled up with contents until it had ripped. It was one of the latter kind that we approached, one which had arrived on my friend's road a few years back, and continued to grow so that we could no longer see behind it, and its flat smooth face was pockmarked with Breaches that rose up several stories above the level of the houses around it.

At the time I hadn't seen the satellite images which show these architectures, these envelopes which contain the Other places, entirely circumscribing our cities, creeping in towards the centres along every possible route, every gap, it might have scared me at the time. Now it can only give me pleasure. It seems an insurmountable joy to think that all around me, with the material certainty of a fact, the intangible expansiveness of a thought, and the hidden majesty of the divine, the Other places continue to triumphantly spread. Nothing and nobody guards the Breaches, and with a shocking matter-of-factness we stepped through a gap in one of the impromptu barriers, weighed down and partially restrained only by the fabricated terrors and mysteries we had spent our lives constructing about what we were stepping into. Terrors that momentarily held back our breath as they lent too vivid life and body to an overlaying of several high-pitch sounds we could hear immediately on passing through, somewhere in the distance, a compound noise along the lines of several hundred muffled dentist drills all operating on different materials and at varying frequencies.

We couldn't see anything unusual or frightening with our flashlights, just plain, dirty concrete walls, and a floor that rose up, away from us to another space beyond this one, into which we passed and from where we could see, directly above, through what looked a Breach, but couldn't be because it was between two spaces both inside the Others, what looked like a mirrored ceiling. Our lights were reflected back at us broken into a thousand shafts, illuminating the plain room we were in as if it were a box inside a turning crystal, above which we could see pieces of ourselves sparkling behind the returning rays of our flashlights, enlarging as we approached, and separating again and again as they enlarged, into more abundant parts and facets that soon atomised us into a dusting of colour amidst a nebula of coruscating fluorescence. Even the slightest movement of the hand holding the torch would send the reflections into a panic, and only as we climbed through into the space did we manage to steady ourselves enough to grasp that this sea of lights was in fact thrown back at us from a room whose forms were almost as dizzying as the way the material they were constructed from reflected light. Under the ceiling, which was like a crumpled tarpaulin made of silver crystal, rows of tables stretched away until what looked like infinity (but was only a fortuitously positioned mirror at the other end), each of which were of

different design but all of the same height, and which were uniformly made of a translucent, ever so slightly orange material which appeared glisteningly wet, and on which seemed to be gathered a layer of fine, sharp and luminous powder that glistened like snow. The tables were waiting for something, and the strength of the light multiplied through the endless surface area of specular materials barely left room for shadows, with only one patch of dark, a hole, a Breach in the floor between several of the tables, relieving the space of its overwhelming glare, and through which we passed quickly and in silence.

It was like in those war films which attempt to faithfully recreate what it is like after a bomb has gone off near you, and which portray everything in silence from the moment the explosive goes off. I am sure that there was still the distant sound of drilling, we have asked each other about it since, and each of us remembers noticing it again momentarily at various points, meaning it was most likely continuous; but from stepping up, into that first Other place, we didn't say a word, we didn't hear a thing, it was as if the aural had been subsumed by the visual faculty in order to help it digest a sudden, catastrophic excess of input. We climbed down through the hole in the floor of the first room and entered the next space, the second of I don't know how many that we passed through. I don't even remember how we found our way back out. I only remember certain tiny specks and moments very clearly: a wall maybe two hundred metres long, built of blocks which caught the light like an opal and were as purple as the deepest hue in an amethyst; a tower containing niches at regular intervals, each carved as ornately as any arabesques drawn in the Book of Kells, and which uniformly faced rough cubic spaces in another tower on the other side of a thin gap, that were all as bare and metallic as containers; something that could have been a library, only instead of books there were rather infinite variations of geometrical shapes in any number of colours and materials; also particularly, one moment when we turned off our torches and realised that there were no lights in any of these places, that they had not been and were not meant to accommodate anybody, at all, and feeling as if everything we were seeing existed only as far as we believed it to exist.

When we turned our torches off it disappeared, perhaps the humming of something far away remained, but the mysteries that we had witnessed with our eyes evaporated as totally as any image on a screen being turned off. It was as if all that strangeness, which although devoid of monsters, bizarre peoples, and ludicrous activities, was so much more extraordinary than any of our puerile speculations had been, could be as tenuous as they were. Our burgeoning edifice of facile story-crafting had been blasted away in the kaleidoscopic twist of our ascent up to the first room, and was never mentioned again, and why should it? It had had no basis in reality other than the boredom, camaraderie and pride of several young boys, and so it disappeared without a trace; but in *these* rooms, even when we turned our torches off and our minds could barely believe what had been there only seconds before, if we just reached out our hands and touched something near us, the darkness would fall away because what we were surrounded by was *real*. Perhaps either a cold iciness would undulate gently away from our fingers, feeling at once like satin and chilled porcelain, or else to

our left our other hand would stroke its way into crevices that might feel like grained wood, but would give slightly as if it were dense sponge, either way would be given confirmation that these Other places were not images that would disappear at the flick of a switch, and were not speculative conjectures existing only in the mind, but were more fantastical than both of these and existed in all their glorious factuality.

Our fears about whether or not our classmates would respect or care about our claims or not had been based on the triple assumption that what we would see would not in any way be able to live up to our fantasies, that we would need to explain ourselves to the rest of the class, and that we would probably not have been the first to have crossed a Breach. As we found ourselves walking down the road again, after having not only crossed a Breach but penetrated deep into the network of Other spaces and seen them in all their inexhaustible variety and invention, those fears had left about as much trace in our thoughts as had the stories we used to find so important. Not only had reality proven to be far beyond anything we could have imagined, but it was everywhere, it was a part of the very spaces we moved through everyday, inverting their banality in on itself, within its concrete surfaces, to contain a magic that was more powerful than the imagination in all its endless tangible, but unseen permutations. Fact had proven to be stranger than fiction, our humdrum surroundings had revealed themselves to contain a weight of unknowable, and great strangeness, which with its revelation had rebalanced the scale of importances which had previously laid so much gravity at the feet of tale-telling, myth-making, plain lying and classroom jostling. None of us ever mentioned anything to anyone else in the class, we simply stopped talking about the Breaches. It was too great a truth to play with, and would only be reduced by any attempt to convey it, would deflate it to the thin flaccidity of idle wordplay. The last thing that occurred to us to worry about was what the class would think of us, or whether we should explain ourselves, we were entering in to the world of facts, and we knew it would replace the fading mystique of a child's whimsy with the transformation of everything we had thought so mundane.

The thoroughness of the way this experience changed our perception of every aspect of our lives can only be conveyed by describing how the very deepest, and most private feelings we had were reinvigorated in the same way as the streets now seemed to hide endless magnificence. We had been certain, instinctively sure, before going in there, that all the time our parents would spend alone each day, behind their locked doors, had something to do with what was beyond the Breaches; and as we passed through those places it was impossible not to recall the glimpses we had caught through keyholes and doors left ajar of what now seemed like prototypes, models, plans and preparations for so many of the inimitable places we had lit-up with our flash lights. A pile of pink luminescent material that I thought I had seen as my friend's father opened and shut his door now became the glowing bloody knife edge adorning the full frontage of each step in a deep, falling staircase; what had looked like part of an elaborate set for an ornate doll's house when sitting on the edge of a desk, now rose up in every direction around us, as big as a theatre, as lurid as a bordello; what had

appeared to be a toy-set, building blocks making train-set bridges, now shot away from us, wide, long, and held as tenuously aloft as any structure by Eiffel or Maillart. It was certain, or rather we were sure, that our parents had designed all of it, that our homes, unknown to us and all along, were, and had always been, the workshops from where issued this bizarre material, the make-up and thought behind the Other places, all of them. Our homes, that we thought we had known so well, were the heart of the whole system.

We were sure, we knew, and our families could see that we did: we were unusually quiet, with a certainty to our step and a seriousness to our looks. Our demeanour intimidated the other classmates, but our families took us aside, one by one, to explain the mystery of the Other places. We were initiated after they saw that we had seen something, and I am sure it was a crossing of a Breach that they had been waiting to see hints of before inducting us. It was an informal affair, just an explanation in the living room, private and domestic, like everything to do with the Other places. No government, no officials, no written rules.

We were told how each adult, everyday, could, and almost always did, take authorship over a place somewhere in the Other places. Every single adult had the right, and the duty, to take part in the creation and extension of them, of these great counterweights to the blanket of knowledge that had trapped us, and still holds the rest of the world in its suffocating minuteness. It was explained that at some point around the time that the last rainforests had been replaced with grazing cows, the northern passage had been filled with regular sea traffic, and creativity had been virtualised and sublimated in the total perfection of the handset; our nation had as a community decided to restructure itself with an unknowable, but self-authored absolute at the core of its constitution. A plebiscite mandated the redirection of a significant portion of our wealth, into the ongoing creation of this man made, unfathomable, unnatural nature. As any form of believable mystery disappeared from the rest of the planet, we began to rebuild a new class of vast, mythic, and irresolvable problem. A vengeful, autonomous simulacrum which would span the whole breadth of an ecosystem, contain the entire meaning of a civilisation, and be composed of the concerted sweat, and considered labour, of the sum of all citizens who were alive, and would ever live. We were all to be little gods designing a forbidden Olympus. We were all set about creating something to stand in Awe of.

We were able, and expected, to commit our very being, the life and thoughts through which we existed, into form and material, to be entrusted to our great memorial, to be interred in the process of our country's immortalisation. This they explained to us was a great private joy, that also formed an unbreakable public bond between everyone in the nation. It joined people together in the knowledge both of their individual fulfilment and continuity, and in the certainty of that being a part of something greater, universal, but nevertheless physical, permanent, untouchable. They explained it as permanent, unstoppable and ongoing, citing the self-perpetuating equipment that our defence industries had built as lovingly as they would have an army, however even after all my years seeing them continue to send Other places marching across our towns, I would still be wary of

claiming any kind of material certitude through time. Even fifty million souls should not tempt the fate of Ozymandias.

After us, the others, group by group, fell silent on the subject as I suppose, each of them went through similar experiences to one degree or another. Perhaps they did not penetrate as far into the Others as we did, but I am sure that they each had their own variation of the conversation on the couch, each had the meaning of the places conveyed to them with different emphases, perhaps some more mystic, others more practical, maybe a few jingoisticaly, but all essentially conveying the fundamental core: you work on your own, seriously, considerately, each night, on a space given to you in its outer dimensions, and when you are done, you are sent another, which you treat with the same sobriety. You keep a job during the day, and you pay taxes to keep the system running. It is simple, but in its continuation it is producing a leviathan worthy of Babel.

I have in the past lived abroad for some time, and perhaps that is why I have written this, almost convinced as I was by the continuous accusations of illogical mysticism, and barbaric, uncivilised misuse of technology, that were thrown at me constantly by people from other countries. I was almost convinced. But I am here. With my child. She is coming up to that age now, at which I am sure, if she is anything I have brought her up to be, she will be making her way across a Breach any week now, and coming back to me changed. For the better, I think.