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McMansions: Re-presenting a divided, subdivided and uncanny suburban landscape

Mike Gray
Edith Cowan University

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McMansions: Re-presenting a divided, subdivided and uncanny suburban landscape.

MIKE GRAY

BACHELOR OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES (HONS)

FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND ARTS

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This exegesis speculates on the rise and spread of 'McMansions' by exploring possible reactions to this architecture and the contextual dimensions of my photographic response. The exegesis aligns aspects of the 'Uncanny' (Freud, 1919) to new trends in domestic architecture and topographical photography. By pictorially offering a counter-narrative to more conventional representations of the 'dream home', it ironically demonstrates that some houses can be viewed as unhomely. The exegesis explains how cultural anxieties can be experienced when viewing contemporary trends in domestic architecture within new suburban developments. It does this by aligning the increased use of featurism (Boyd, 1980) in suburban architecture to excessive fictional architectural devices first seen in fictional gothic literature, and later, popular culture. Aiding these anxieties, and also explored, is the concept of historically bereft, continually changing architecture only borrowing from imagined or imported ideas of 'home'. This leads to the theory of the 'spatial uncanny' (Vidler, 1994), where a sense of home and belonging evaporates with every re-incarnation of suburbia. As the resulting images are a product of contrived photographic technologies and discourses, the exegesis frames them by referencing post-modern notions of photographic narrative. By the use of modified plastic lenses and high-end digital cameras in low light, a new approach towards architectural photography is made possible.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The 'dream house' embraces much of what is considered to be the aspirational suburban experience. The mass mediated portrayal of life in this domestic landscape is well advertised. When selecting new homes, our choices as suburban consumers are promoted as being intertwined with status, identity, fantasy and a sense of 'home'. In regards to mass-produced domestic architecture, the formulaic designs heavily concentrate on external representations that act as signifiers for these promoted ideals (Dovey, 1994). For the passerby, both on the street and through the media, part of the meaning is generated by the façade and the size of external visible structure of the house. It could be argued, as Horin (2005) has, that the importance of these presentations has increased over recent years with the advent of certain styles of domestic architecture. The increased use of non-functional features and the actual increased size of the façade is becoming a staple feature of new homes. In the hierarchy of values attached to public presentations of the home, the façade has come to dominate over traditional displays such as the garden. Curiously, as the façade becomes more excessive there is little space left for home life to be carried on outside of the house. The resulting absence of life raises un-answered questions surrounding 'family life' performed within and around these constructed spaces. The stylistic references of these façades are aligned with both the romantic and the modern, their excessive features point forwards and backwards, but not inwards.

The descriptive noun 'McMansions' is a disparaging term that connotes excess and the inauthentic. It could be loosely defined as the biggest house on a comparatively small block with excessive decorative features incorporated into the design. The term, whose inception cannot be attributed to anyone, has moved into popular culture aided by negative associations with the McDonalds food chain. As we become familiar with it and other pejorative architectural terms, such as 'starter castle', 'faux chateau' and 'garage mahal', some derision has obviously appeared for these terms to have currency.

Initially for me though, these new 'dream houses' produced anxieties, the origins of which are hard to pin down. There are possible planning and environmental criticisms that could be levelled at McMansions, but these aren't the source of my apprehension. There is a visceral reaction that tells me something doesn't belong, but I don't know if it's the McMansion or me. Their structures look familiar but they don't reference the

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demolished homes or natural bush that used to be there, they look like simulations of imported historic architecture pastiched over modern designs. Their excessive façades, acting as barriers to public scrutiny, give few clues as to the lives inside. Instead, it suggests something hidden. This new version of suburbia seems to trade on living out a better, more desirable and affordable fantasy, thereby mimicking the old version as well as advocating its replacement. Curiously, for me, the new dream home suggests, "home is a place where something bad is about to happen" (Indiana, 1992, p. 62). It is uncanny how something can look like a home but make you think it's unhomely.

The focus of this exegesis is to identify and explore my initial reaction to McMansions and to provide contextual dimensions of my artistic response. Importantly, I first linked my visceral reaction to the heightened emotion of excessive fictional architecture. First seen in gothic literature and then popular culture, I saw a mix between Dracula's castle and 'A Nightmare on Elm Street'. This was reinforced by the excessive facades and the actual gothic architectural features I saw; turrets, towers, vaulted windows, Juliette balconies. Aware of how close this reaction was to becoming criticism, I wanted to explore other possible explanations for this visceral sensation. This led my investigation to what Vidler (1994) calls the idiosyncratic return of the 'literary uncanny' and the estrangement of the 'spatial uncanny'. The 'spatial uncanny' describes the dislocation of the modern city from any historic or natural conception of 'home'. The 'Uncanny' arises from Freud's (1919/2003) subtle interpretations of the German words for 'home' and its binary, 'unhomely'. In an applied sense, he says that the uncanny belongs, "to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (p. 122).

Through the use of modified photographic lenses and low light photography, my initial aim was to produce a body of work that highlighted the uncanny properties and gothic iconography pastiched in certain new suburban architecture. By re-presenting McMansions in an unfamiliar light I hoped to better explain the anxieties I first had about them. As the process of visual re-presentation forms a new narrative, distinct from other previous narratives, it invites closer inspection and possible new meanings repressed in the ideal of the 'dream home'. Narratives frame reality and can be changed to suit particular discourses (Bright, 1989). My images assume the audience is visually literate and has experienced a variety of Australian suburban landscapes and (gothic) fictional genres so as to better articulate the link.

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The motivation for this project centres on the recent changes in/to the Australian domestic landscape and my reaction to it. A significant shift is occurring in the construction of homes (Horin, 2005) inviting investigation, commentary and critique. As suburbs undergo a change in architecture and space, how they may be read changes (Dovey, 1994). This new direction in certain aspects of the 'Australian dream' can be read a number of ways: signs of progress, signs of aspirations, a shift upmarket, an expression of taste, changing identities, to name a few. The biggest house on the smallest block can be seen as the latest point in the domestic housing cycle where the old suburban home is replaced by a new dream (house).

However, suburbia can no longer be contained by a simple binary argument: 'suburbia is good' versus 'suburbia is bad' (Healy in Ferber, Healy & McAuliffe, (Eds.), 1994). Previous cultural studies in this area have produced work from pure disgust to admiration (McAuliffe, 1996, Miller, 2004, Boyd, 1980). This highly worked cultural studies landscape has seemingly produced such varying views that a basic ontological consensus concerning the true nature of suburbia evaporates.

CHAPTER ONE - UNEASY FACADES

INTRODUCTION

I'm standing in front of a new house at night but I don't just see a house. I can pick out features that resemble suburban homes I've known just as easily as I see features that resemble a small office block, a European villa and a B-grade film set. Though I'm not sure it would make sense if it was an office block or film set. The structure closely resembles many buildings, but to me, doesn't signify one thing. The house is largely proportioned to the land on which it sits. Its' impressive structure, whilst staring back at me, looms over the street just like the one next to it. There's a physical, uneasy sensation. I've seen it before. It's so new.

> Something is uncanny – that is how it begins. But at the same time one
> must search for that remoter "something", which is already close at hand.
> (Bloch, 1988, p. 245)

The phenomenon of 'uncanny' domestic architecture has previously been exploited in popular culture. This is witnessed in the architectural plot devices of the horror film moving from Dracula's castle to the house next door. Features such as vaulted window arches and Roman pillars migrated onto domestic film sets as a way of bringing horror back home. Most people would have been exposed to such architecture from *The Addams Family* (1964) home through to Batman's mansion in *The Dark Knight* (2008), complete with underground caves. Both these examples are outside the horror genre but demonstrate how gothic iconography, architecturally, has resonance in popular culture. From castles with cellars to family homes with basements, we have seen the uncanny lurking. Reinforced by news outlets, we have become accustomed to identifying the home as a possible location for gothic incursions into our psyche.

The advent of McMansion architecture evokes the uncanny in different ways. Their historically irreverent structures loom over the viewer producing a sense of architectural and spatial uncanny (Vidler, 1994) and their use of excessive featurism (Boyd, 1980) aligns them stylistically with romantic gothic architectural excess. Whilst the suburban design may not be directly inspired by gothic novels and the link idiosyncratic, there are common themes in both. Both, as I'll explore later, can invoke an uneasy, strangely

familiar feeling that heightens the emotional response of viewers when the two's architecture is experienced.

GOTHIC FICTION AND ICONOGRAPHY

Dracula is dead. So is gothic fiction. Francis Ford Coppola killed them. After more than one hundred years of Dracula's excesses and transgressions, Coppola returned to the beginning of Bram Stoker's 1897 gothic novel, humanised Dracula and his story and thereby enabled a significant gothic plot to die. He gave Dracula reflective emotional qualities whereby he laments his life of excess and ultimately retires. This is how Fred Botting (2005) uses the storyline of Coppola's 1992 *Dracula* to illustrate the current position of gothic fiction. He further suggests that gothic's 'everydayness' has outgrown its usefulness as a genre in its own right. It has diffused its way into every other fictional genre. He argues that gothic devices are found in romance, horror, science fiction and most other mainstream fictional genres. If this is the end of the gothic genre, where did it start?

According to Byron and Punter (2004), historical references help define the contemporary notion of 'Gothic'. They claim the distinction between actual histories of the Goths and references to them is what's important. It is the myth they left behind, not who they were that produces different meanings of the term 'gothic'. It is documented that they invaded and overthrew Rome in 410AD. Later in the fifth century they colonised parts of Britain. As Byron and Punter see it, as the Goths left little art or literature of their own, it was up to others, mainly those who survived their incursions, to document the Goths. This record portrayed them as invaders and destroyers by Italian art historians. During the Renaissance they re-presented the Goths as the epitome of the medieval and uncivilised. However, across the English Channel there was a movement during the eighteenth century that had an interest in creating an opposing myth. Motivated by an idealistic desire to reclaim all things 'English', both culturally and politically, historians delved into Britain's past to prove England's virtuous origins. They attributed and celebrated the representative system of government that the Goths brought with them.

Gothic became a very mobile term, remaining constant only in the way it functioned to establish a set of polarities revolving primarily around the concepts of the primitives and the civilised. (Byron & Punter, 2004, p. 3)

This binary tension in the term 'gothic' could be ideologically linked to dismissing the 'primitive', and on the other hand, the reclamation of the virtuous in that primitive world. Byron and Punter suggest that, "the (term) gothic always remains the symbolic site of a culture's discursive struggle to define and claim possession of the civilized" (2004, p. 5). This understanding of 'gothic' locates it in a political discourse.

It is from the political meaning that 'Gothic' mutates and emerges in popular culture. Smith (2007) claims that, "such reconstructions of a somewhat fantasized version of the past (combined with a sense of 'barbaric' Germanic tribes) provide a context for the emergence of Gothic as a literary mode" (p. 2). Smith argues that it was the age of Enlightenment that provided gothic fiction with a counter point. As with the Romantics of the eighteenth century, gothic traded on things not linked to rational enquiry. It was an escape from science. It recalled a past age where imagination, raw emotion and the human experience mattered more than rationalism. It has become a way to represent the pre-modern, and that of the human experience which is outside the limits of modernist paradigms.

It is Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Ontranto,* published in 1764, that Smith (2007), and also Botting (2005), Cavaliero (1995) and Behrendt (1990) cite as a seminal piece of gothic fiction. According to Behrendt, it "is a storehouse of the motifs that are to flood the Gothic novel" (p. 63). He goes on to list these motifs, which are too numerous to mention here, but can be broken down into two groups, excessive and transgressive. These are two important features of gothic fiction that Botting (2005) concentrates on; to which I will return. Smith also identifies some controversy surrounding the novel's authorship that helps define 'gothic'. In the first edition, the authorship was attributed to a translation by "William Marshall of a sixteenth century edition of an Italian Manuscript" (p. 18). This locates the book in some strange, forgotten foreign genre. It was only after the book's commercial success, when Walpole took the credit, that it was then considered a new style of writing where the supernatural can be a metaphor for the human condition.

Botting (2005) identifies trangression and excess as the staples of gothic fiction. Excess could loosely be defined as any plot device that artificially heightens the emotional response. Examples include human attributes such as wealth, aristocratic lineage and political power together with the settings and scenery employed. A castle set on a craggy mountain is not essential to the story though its decorative and sublime excess invokes a higher emotional response. In the case of transgression, the plot crosses the bounds of reality and possibility. For Botting, this raft of metaphors engages the supernatural as well as the internal psychological demons that became prominent later in the genre. A good example of this is the painting on the wall that comes alive. In early incarnations the painting is a portal used by the ghost of the person it depicts, later it is a flicker of light on the painting that tricks the eye and questions the viewer's sanity. Smith (2007), Botting (2005), Cavaliero (1995) and Behrendt (1990) talk about the relationship of transgression, in one form or another, to Freud's (1919/2003) essay, the 'Uncanny'.

THE UNCANNY

Freud (1919/2003) goes to great lengths in his essay 'The Uncanny', to dissect what he considers to be the oblique meanings of the term. As seen previously with the term 'gothic', Freud produces two seemingly contradictory but not quite opposing meanings of the German word (un/heimlich) from which it is taken. These subtle interpretations of German language deal with the idea of 'home' and its binary, 'unhomely'. By attributing contradictory conscious and subconscious qualities to what belongs to the metaphoric home, a relationship between the familiar and repressed is made apparent. If home is simultaneously a place of safety and a site of repressed memories, some tension exists. For Freud this tension produces a visceral reaction. In an applied sense, he says that the uncanny belongs, "to all that arouses dread and creeping horror' (2003, p. 122). He adds "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (p. 123), refining it further by suggesting, "'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (p. 124).

Giblett (2006), using social perspective and familiarity to create meaning, applies Freud's 'uncanny' to crocodiles. Indigenous cultures are at home with crocodiles whilst others view them with dread. He says, "the monstrously scared / demonic though, is perhaps an apt definition of the 'uncanny'" (p. 301). Giblett argues that the uncanny is a

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vector which takes one back to the repressed, something that invokes the forgotten. He picks up on a story that Freud briefly mentions in 'The Uncanny' to illustrate a point. The story is a gothic tale titled "Inexplicable". Written by C.G. Moberly in 1917, it uses a wooden table with carved alligator features to invoke uncanny responses from the characters. Transgressive phenomena arise when each character consciously or subconsciously encounters the table. One swears he can smell the swamp where a crocodile killed a companion. Giblett's argument is that the 'uncanny' transports your subconscious to something you cannot see (the swamp), something familiar yet repressed, creating dread. According to Freud this is evoked by things that are novel or new (the table). I aim to illustrate that the same effect is possible when viewing McMansions. The novel façade is a vector to personal, repressed feelings of 'home'. It reminds you of a home but not a version of home you have ever seen before and therefore it is unhomely. As well as making you wonder how life transpires behind the façade, it accesses your own subconscious feelings of home, especially if it's accompanied with uneasy and uncanny sensations.

Applied in a scientific environment, roboticist Masahiro Mori applied the 'uncanny' to individual viewer's subjective reactions to humanlike robots (Brooks, Durrant-Whyte, & Thrun, 2007). He strived to account for strange sensations people had when they encountered different robots with increasing likenesses to human beings. His resulting theory was, in practice, as his robots approached the likeness of humans, the viewer attempts to understand them as humans, not robots. This creates an uneasy sensation which he called the 'Uncanny Valley'. The 'Valley' refers to a dip in a graph he created (illustration #1) to map uncanny reactions to robots. The graph has two variables, a 'human-like' object's similarity to humans against how familiar the viewer is with them.
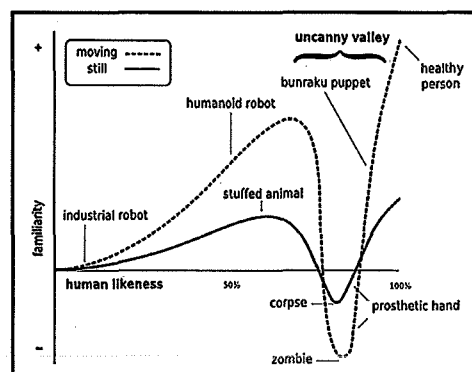

Illustration #1

As you move across the horizontal axis, the object's similarity to humans increases. This results in the viewer steadily becoming more familiar with the object until it approaches a true human likeness. There we see a dramatic drop in familiarity, even a negative response. This graph could be applied to McMansions. As their similarity to our concept of 'home' isn't exact, but still close, we experience anxiety as we try to understand them as 'home'. Subconsciously the familiar becomes very unfamiliar.

This confrontation with the subconscious mind is similar to the 'sublime'. Mishra (1994) focuses on how Kant's formulation of the 'sublime' is manifested in gothic fiction.

> In the classic formulation of Kant (to which all theorizations of the sublime return) the effects are the consequence of the mind's confrontation with an idea too large for expression, too self-consuming to be contained in any adequate form of representation, but which idea, as representation, in a momentary surrender of the law of reason the mind nevertheless grasps. (Mishra, 1994, p. 19)

The sublime was employed as an excessive plot device in gothic literature for nearly a century before the uncanny rose above it in the hierarchy of gothic literary devices (Vidler, 1994). The fundamental difference between the uncanny and the sublime within the context of romantic literature is the type of terror it suggests. The sublime deals with grand natural spaces that promote a sense of vertigo whilst the uncanny creeps up on you, closes in, claustrophobic.

UNCANNY ARCHITECTURE

> With the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit… The feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible… There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. (Edgar Allen Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher", cited in Vidler, 1994, p. 274).

This excerpt from Edgar Allen Poe's 1839 short story illustrates an early literary link between the uncanny and domestic architecture. Different from earlier gothic tales, there is a paradigmatic shift from the uncanny gothic trope of the castle to that of the home. This signifies the start of a domesticated literary terror that has become a staple in modern culture genres, such as horror movies. Vidler (1994) locates this version of the literary uncanny as entertainment for the viewer by stating:

> The uncanny, in this sense, might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear: one carefully bounded by the limits of real material security and the pleasure principle afforded by a terror that was, artistically at least, kept well under control. (p. 2.)

Outside of the literary discourse there are other links between the uncanny and architecture. Most relevant to the modern city are discourses around constructed space. Spaces have been gendered, ethnicised, socialised, politicised and psychoanalysed. Regardless of the ideological conclusions, when these discourses are applied to an old city, there is a long time-line of architecture and cultural products to draw meaning from. A sense of 'home' is constructed from the recognisable history of the city. Everything belongs and is therefore homely. Opposite to this is the modern city, the new urban/suburban metropolis. With no recognisable history, it is unhomely when compared to the old city. There is a lack of signs that map the new social trajectory. The idea of homely/unhomely then employs memory to be an important part of deciding what constitutes a home. The old city helps this process by providing historical references. The new city tries to recreate this by borrowing from an imagined past, an architect's copy of an imagined home. The spatial uncanny, according to Van der Straeten (2003), is that the metropolis inherently estranges the occupant and can result in manifestations of agoraphobia and claustrophobia. Vidler (1994) talks about this 'metropolis uncanny' as a generalized source of modern anxiety; a spatial fear brought on by a dislocation from one's roots. He identifies this spatial fear with Walter Benjamin's appraisal of a post Napoleonic and revolutionary France where, "all 'local customs' and community bonds were brutally severed: Individuals, lost in an isolation from nature, without contact with the past, living only in the rapid present….detached from a fatherland they see nowhere" (p. 4).

In the 1970s a group of architects that included Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Wolf D. Prix and Helmut Swiczinky began to apply modern cultural theory to the design of buildings and public spaces. One aim was to utilise the inherent uncanny attributes of architecture as they saw it, to cause "discomfort and the unbalancing of expectations" (Tschumi 1996, p. 92) when experiencing modern architecture. Influenced by such theorists as Derrida and Foucault, they believed architecture had the power to reinforce or disrupt dominant cultural narratives. Depending on each architect's ideology, they used a raft of new ideas and theories that included the 'uncanny' to de-familiarise the spaces they designed. According to Van der Straeten (2003), deliberately making architecture strange can be seen as the third major uncanny discourse, after the literary and spatial, applicable to the history of architecture.

Others have linked the home as a metaphor for the subconscious. This metaphor aligns itself with psychoanalysis and was first applied to the gothic castle and then later the home. Valdine Clemens (cited in Worland, 2007) suggests that the castle:

> May be associated with the maternal or the sexual body, the human psyche, or the patriarchal social order. The dark tunnels and the underground passages of Gothic edifices represent descent into the unconscious, away from the socially constructed self and towards the uncivilized, the primitive. Violence, pursuit, and rape occur in these lower depths, yet they are also the realms where valuable discoveries are made. (p. 28)

This works with Freud's idea that the uncanny is the repressed made visible. Something buried (in the bowels of the home) is brought into the consciousness once the façade is witnessed.

Two of the uncanny architectural discourses mentioned are apparent within McMansions. You see the home that seems unhomely, that reminds you of the literary horror movie. Secondly, there is an alienating, modern metropolis affect produced by many McMansions in a row gazing down on you. However, the architect's deliberate intent to evoke an uncanny response is not so apparent. It would be hard to argue that these buildings were intentionally designed to unsettle, but ironically, the over use of featurism does produce this affect.

CHAPTER TWO – THE RE-PRESENTATION

"And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife; and you may ask yourself, well...how did I get here?" (Talking Heads, *Once in a lifetime*, Sire Records, 1980)

Loius Esson, in his 1912 play, *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*, provided one of the earliest critiques of suburbia:

> The Suburban home must be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and cowardly and depressing in modern life. It endeavors to eliminate the element of danger in human affairs. But without dangers there can be no joy, no ecstasy, no spiritual adventures. The suburban home is blasphemy. It denies life. (cited in Carter & Whitlock, 1992, p. 242)

The counterpoint to this criticism is that suburbia is actually a breeding ground for postmodern individuals' identities (Miller, 2004). These identities are informed in part by their consumption of suburbia. Miller states, "consumption expresses taste, and taste classifies our social status" (p. 37).

In recent years, our changing tastes are reflected in the landscape of Australia's suburbs (Horin, 2005) and most apparently in the traditional middle-class. It is here a status-seeking population is migrating up and across the social ladder. Gwyther (2008) talks about a social group that have been referred to as 'Aspirationals', people who haven't migrated far from traditional working-class suburbs but to a place where suburbia has been transformed into master planned estates full of extravagant, cheaply built housing. Gwyther describes her idea of the term, 'McMansion' as:

> A style of architecture invariably viewed as gaudy, overblown, mass-produced, cheaply constructed and environmentally destructive – much like the famous burger chain after which the style was named. (p. 4)

Gwyther goes on to surmise McMansions as an extension of suburban fringe development, where cheap, small 'fibro' cottages on big blocks have been traded for cheap, big houses on small blocks. Also, these suburban developments are still the butt

of elitist jokes where 'Westies' (inhabitants of the working-class, western suburbs of Sydney) are now 'Aspirationals' living in 'McMansions'.

One way to define the aspirations of domestic housing consumers is to look at the promotional material used to sell these houses. For instance, by observing the naming conventions employed by the builders, an insight into what appeals to particular consumers is apparent. The 'Colonial' or the 'Centenary' model homes are targeted at a different consumer to that of the 'Riviera' or the 'Apollo'. One group locates the metaphoric meaning of home in the past, whilst others make a connection with progress and power. That is to say there's a correlation between the naming of homes and the shifting domestic ideology in Australia. Dovey (1994) states:

> The 'model home' is a mirror in which a suburban subject is constructed, which at once reflects and reproduces the great Australian Dream. It is a mirror in which we might read the suburban condition and the cultural values that drive it. (p. 128)

On the west coast of Australia Stratton (2008) describes Perth as 'self-congratulatory' in its displays of status and success. He describes the façade of suburban houses as serving two interests, trophy and barrier. Perth is promoted as an idyllic suburban town. When this utopia is threatened by crime, it is seen as a "'gothic' incursion into our psyche" (p. 255). He places this fear of a 'gothic' incursion in historic local events, particularly the Edgar Cooke murders of the 1960s and the unsolved Claremont serial killings.

SUBURBAN ARCHITECTURE

Much of the criticism levelled at previous Australian suburban architecture is that it is made up of fancy (or not so fancy) boxes. A group of boxes joined together or just one big box with a few decorative features such as a section of stone-wall near the entrance. When this theory is applied to McMansions the only conclusion is that the boxes have become bigger and fancier. Boyd (1980) sums up this approach to architecture as the 'Australian Ugliness'. After plotting the migration of the house and its design from the garden suburbs of Britain to the functional design (or lack of) in Australia, Boyd thinks it became ugly. He attributes much of this ugliness to a shift from architecture appeasing the spirit to architecture being a tool for representing beauty. He argues that

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the design of space and spaces has been relegated lower in relation to the desired outcomes of architecture. It's more important to invest in looking good rather than feeling good. This critique is juxtaposed by McAuliffe's (1996) assessment of the artist Howard Arkley's work:

> The decorative embellishments applied to suburban houses, which critic Robin Boyd condemned as 'featurism' in the 1960s, are celebrated by Arkley, who seems intrigued by the way these established codes can mark one house as an exotic Californian bungalow and another as a quaint English cottage. Where Boyd found pathetic aspirations and bad taste, Arkley finds a fascinating and sophisticated complex of styles and signs. (p. 105)

SUBURBAN ART AND TOPOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPES

'White men got no dreaming' (Gregory, 2006, p. 1), but we do have an 'Australian dream'. It is this 'dream' that Gregory cites from Richard Brown's critique of Arkley's work as 'spraying the Australian dream' (p. 1). As aboriginal artists refer to their dreamtime, Arkley refers to his suburban life. Gregory aligns Arkley's artistic success with a more populist view of suburbia, which he claims is demonstrated by the success of television shows like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*.

> Such is the puzzling status of the suburbs: they are continually displayed, only to be declared a subject beneath the dignity of art; they are a subject of endless fascination, yet repeatedly characterised as banal; they are condemned as uniform and monotonous, yet seem to provide an endless variety of imagery. Only in recent years have artists found ways to move beyond this pattern of attraction and repulsion, pointing the way towards a new appreciation of the suburbs and their acceptance as a legitimate subject for the arts. (McAuliffe, 1996, p. 10)

This paradox according to McAuliffe could be a result of there being no defining set of attributes to describe suburbia. He also highlights the relationship between the artist and the suburbs by stating, "it becomes clear that, for artists, the suburbs and

suburbia...offered a way to construct metaphors for Australia's national and cultural identity, or to explore theories of the visual arts" (p. 101).

One body of photographic work that tries to define a particular suburban identity is that of Bill Owens. With parallels to Australia's suburban growth, Owens investigates the new suburban fringes of American cities. His 1973 book, *Suburbia*, is often cited as being an influential photographic study of suburban life and dreaming. Morrill (2000) distinguishes his style from that of previous topographical photographers by stating:

> As opposed to other street photographers of the day, such as Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander who, in the tradition of Cartier-Bresson's and Robert Frank's politically charged "decisive moment", constructed their photography around formal visual juxtapositions and visual puns, Owens built his work around the intersection of a neutral journalistic stance and the dry, terse, deadpan commentary of the residents themselves. (p. 1)
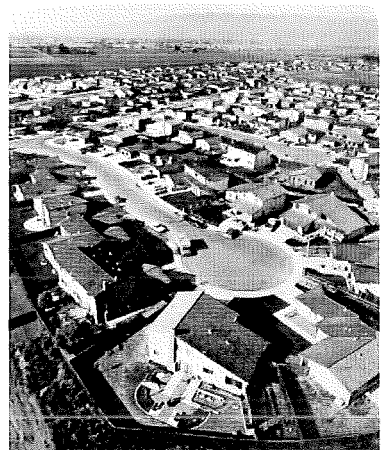
Untitled images from *Suburbia*, Bill Owens, 1973

His approach to photography is similar to that of Eugene Atget's Paris street photography of the early twentieth century. By not privileging any part of the streetscape, Atget didn't emotionalise particular subjects within the street. Unlike other photographers who might single out a building or person, his photographs are records of what was in front of him. Walter Benjamin (cited in Meyerowitz &Westerbeck, 1994, p. 109) says that 'Atget photographed Paris as if it were "the scene of a crime"'. This is ironic as Atget's unemotional style came about by commissions in which he was asked

to photograph the older parts of Paris by people who romanticised its demise through modernisation.

Owens' photographs were considered as part of an emerging genre of photography that primarily studied particular topographical landscapes. A defining point of this genre was the group exhibition titled: "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape". The 1975 exhibition applied a different approach to landscape photography to that of the Kodachrome awe and wonder images previously circulated by *National Geographic* etc. It was also seen as a departure from the black and white 'art' photography of Minor White and Ansell Adams. The consistent style of the group, as intended by the curator William Jenkins, was the absence of style altogether. They wanted to strip away any contrived use of photography that could generate meaning.

> The *New Topographics* photographers...shun all the conventional norms
> of beauty and sentiment to which art and kitsch landscape photography
> appeal. Rather, they present themselves as self-consciously knowing
> "naïfs", artless artists. (Bright, 1989, p.132)

One difference between the *New Topographics* photographers and Owens was that he went inside the homes (landscape) and photographed the performance of the inhabitants as they carried out their life for the camera. Through this process of performance the subjects nearly always seem happy and content. This seems to pose problems about claims his straight forward/journalistic style was neutral. Even after stripping away contrived photographic styles his photographs still give an altered and edited sense of suburban life beyond that of the camera's altered view.

Thirty years on, there seems to be a trend back towards deliberately applying contrived photographic techniques to the topographic/landscape subjects. This time though, instead of the romantic ideology imposed on nature, photographers are using different methods to negotiate less conventional meanings within their subjects. Marc Rader is photographing new suburban estates much as Owens did thirty years previously. They have changed appearance but still sit on the edge of a suburban fringe and on top of freshly cleared land.

In his book, *Scanscape,* the shifting focal plane he employs by using a tilting view camera, produces an uncanny effect. It's uncanny because the images simultaneously resemble familiar structures and subconscious dreams. The one image signifies the familiar and the repressed. Freud's argument is that repressed feelings and memories can be attached to an object or site that is similar/familiar to the original. Viewing uncanny depictions of McMansions can return your own repressed feelings of home. The images also cause a sensation similar to looking at a toy town close-up; the depth of field makes suburbia look like a child's toy. This link to childhood memory aids in the 'return of the repressed'.

Untitled image from *Scanscape*, Marc Rader, 1999

The result of scaling something down, making small, produces a different relationship between the viewer and the miniature to that of the viewer and the life scaled version. Claude Levi-Strauss (1972) theorized that this different relationship revolved around breaking down a cultural bias to the object depicted.

> What is the virtue of reduction either of scale or in the number of properties?... To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it. Reduction in scale reverses this situation. Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this qualitative transposition extends and diversifies

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our power over a homologue of the thing; and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance. (Claude Levi-Strauss, 1972, p. 23)

Beyond this, it could be argued that Rader's scaled down versions of suburban utopia loose their associations with the signified and links are formed with a more easily comprehended child's toy.

Another modern topographical photographer is Mark Luthringer, who at first uses a 'straight' photographic method to record single objects within suburbia and then puts multiple examples together in a grid formation. By viewing an array of similar objects together, it can evoke a different response in the viewer and therefore produce different meanings. He applies this method to suburban artifacts such as McMansions, pick-up trucks, mobile phones to name a few, as a way of protesting first world consumption and consumerism.

The typological array's inherent ability to depict prevalence and repetition make it the perfect technique for examining the excess, redundancy, and meaningless freedom of our current age of consumption. (Luthringer, 2004, p. 1)

Untitled image from *Ridgemont Typologies*, Mark Luthringer, 2004

With advances in photographic technology, new ways of depicting subjects are possible. As analogue cameras could move beyond the human eye's capabilities, so digital cameras have added other hyper-real possibilities in representation. In particular, digital sensors can 'see in the dark' with a clarity over and above that of film.

Untitled images from *Home*, Tomoyuki Sakaguchi, 2006

This function has been used by Tomoyuki Sakaguchi to photograph the suburbs of Tokyo at night. The results are bright photographs whose light source/s are difficult to comprehend. The effect is that of a controlled 'film set' lit by multiple sources.By re-presenting suburbia as a space normally reserved for drama, the spaces he photographs seem strange but yet familiar.

This process of 'making strange' was first conceptualised by Russian Futurist artists in the early 1900s. The process of de-familiarising over-worked signs in art and mediated representations was called 'Ostranenie'. Born from a desire to breakdown the conventions of symbolic language, Ostranenie was aligned with a political doctrine that aimed to dismantle bourgeois society. The Futurists maintained that the function of art relied on the audience's capacity to recognise (signs) rather than the artist's ability to see (the truth). Viktor Shklovsky, an originator of the movement, believed the power of signs and symbols could be re-activated by presenting them in a different way. This, he argued, would reverse the dulled perceptions of the audience and therefore make them spend longer recognising and conceptualising the world around them. Watney (1982) quotes Shklovsky:

> Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life, to make the stone *stony*. The end of art is to give a sensation of the object as seen, not as recognised. The technique of art is to make things 'unfamiliar', to make forms obscure, so as to increase the difficulty and duration of

perception. The act of perception in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product. (p. 161)

Ostranenie was taken up by photographers such as Rodchenko as a conceptual starting point for their craft. Outside the tradition of established visual arts practice, photography could reach a far wider audience. Up until this point, photography had relied heavily on emulating pictorialist painters in an effort to attain 'art' status. Rodchenko's work can be seen as a radical departure from reinforcing beauty by re-presenting familiar signs as unfamiliar. He did this by altering camera angles, perspective and montaging photographs. A shift in meaning is brought on by the de-familiarisation of signs. It utilises the idea that there are defined narratives pertaining to the world around us, which we have become accustomed to, but are still mutable when different modes of representation are applied to them.

NARRATIVES

According to Lyotard (1984), the 'grand narratives' of history are redundant. The need to legitimise the modern world's trajectory with this narrative structure has faded. Since the enlightenment, legitimisation took the form of narratives that framed the industrial age in terms of growth, knowledge and progress. A promise, without limits, that all society would benefit from urbanisation, mass industry and scientific truth. Lyotard argues that these redundant grand narratives have been broken down and replaced by new knowledge made possible through advances in mass communications. By freeing up access to information, the world is conceptualised differently within these new technologies. He argues that as many of the major scientific advances in the postmodern era deal with communications and language/data storage, the result is a new knowledge. As this knowledge is realised through capitalist investment, it becomes a product to be consumed. Lyotard surmises in this post-industrial age, 'knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold...' (p. 4).

Wells (2007) cites Lyotard's theory to plot photography's role as an influential technology in the modern and postmodern era. Wells states in the modern paradigm, photography became a new narrative form by "stopping time and producing detail over

and above the eye" (p. 19). Photography supported the grand narratives of the modern era by framing the world in terms of scientific knowledge, underpinned by the presumed objectivity of the camera's gaze. Photography's narrative function in the postmodern era however, ironically played a role in dispelling the promises of the enlightenment. It could illustrate progress gone wrong. Also, photography's claims of objectivity, as in all forms of representation, are mutable. 'Truth' could now be widely distributed across a range of conflicting narratives, producing different meanings. Photographs then become handmaidens to this struggle over meaning. Allan Sekula (1982) puts it succinctly:

> The meaning of a photograph, like any other entity is inevitably subject to
> cultural definitions....Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of
> someone's investment in sending a message....In short, the overall
> function of photographic discourse is to render itself transparent. But
> however the discourse may deny and obscure its own
> terms, it cannot escape them. (Sekula, pp. 84-87)

If photographic narratives frame a simulation of reality, they can be changed to suit a particular discourse. Bright (1989) uses the example of "small town America" landscapes to illustrate her view that landscapes can be politically contrived.

> Despite its cultural dominance, this is a landscape in which the major
> portion of the nation's populace-its urban natives and refugees
> (including blacks, Hispanics, homosexuals, Jews) find no positive
> reflection but instead oppression. (p. 126)

The 'small town America' representations have been copied many times by photographers to a point where the reality of the subject is over looked. The images become more akin to themed Disneyland attractions than the people who live in them. This leads to Jean Baudrillard's (1994) concept of the 'simulacra', copies that refer only to themselves, not any original. The simulation of reality has become more important than reality. In terms of photography, particularly advertising photography, a new narrative surrounding the 'ideal' home is constructed from previous marketed representations of home. According to Baudrillard, this could also "mask the absence of any profound reality" (p. 6).

CHAPTER THREE - IN PRACTICE

TECHNIQUE

> While there is perhaps a province in which the photograph can tell us
> nothing more than what we see with our own eyes, there is another in
> which it proves to us how little our eyes permit us to see. (Dorothea Lange,
> cited in Adatto, 2008, p. 248)

Two important pieces of camera equipment produced my images. In a sense the two are binaries, aligned with photographic evolution and devolution. One, the high-end digital camera body, captures lowlight with a colour fidelity far exceeding the human eye. In low light the eye can only register density; any perceived colour information is introduced by the mind. The wide colour gamut seen in my images would only be visible to the human eye in daylight. Traditional analogue film could not replicate this either. Film is too sensitive to the differences in colour temperatures of artificial light sources such as street lamps. Even with this new digital technology in low light, my exposure times range from five to thirty seconds, necessitating the use of a tripod. The long exposure introduced cars as moving light sources as well as capturing the movement of clouds.

The other piece of equipment resurrects a piece of photographic history; a hand-made improvised lens with a single plastic element imprints its optical fringe aberrations on the image. The result is an image that can only be rendered in focus where the light crosses in the middle of the lens. Whilst this produces a lower optical quality to that of multi-element glass lenses, it is incidentally closer to that of human foveal vision. A human eye has only one element, and has significant optical aberrations towards the edge. The limitations of foveal aberrations are overcome by saccadic eye movements. The eye quickly jumps and scans a scene which the mind then stitches together to produce a sharp view over-all.

Further to this, my modified lens artificially produces a small depth of field and altered focal plane. It matches the small depth of field experienced when you look at an object close-up through one eye; optically, you can only render part of that object as focussed and therefore it registers as being close. An example is if you held a ten-centimetre object close to your eye and looked along its length, you cannot focus on its entirety.

However, when the object is one metre away, you can. This phenomenon is the exact opposite to the problem faced by filmmakers when photographing miniaturised model film-sets.

> Despite all the work which has gone into the construction of a miniature set, its appearance on the screen will be compromised if it is not properly photographed... It is essential, first, that the optical depth of field for a miniature... calls for a relatively short focal-length lens and/or fairly small apertures. (Fielding, 1965, p. 370)

The need for both a short focal length and small aperture is to artificially increase the depth of field. This is because, as the camera has to get close to the model, the model's size will be given away if any part of it is rendered out of focus. Whilst my images don't alter perspective, they do simulate this phenomenon of the subject being actually very close to a scaled down object.

In this photographic body of work I have selected images that illustrate a limited range of modern suburban architecture and spaces. Nevertheless, the domestic architecture depicted represents a wide range of pastiched styles from the romantic to modern, or in some cases, both. They can be grouped as double-storied, large rectangular homes with excessive featurism styled into their facades. I have included some images of surrounding suburban and common recreational spaces to illustrate the re-occurrence of the 'spatial uncanny' beyond that of the home and therefore aid the investigation. All the houses are located within Perth's established metropolitan area and sit on either existing sub-divided lots or as groups within marketed estates. The estates, surrounded by established suburbs are possible through the reclamation of nature reserves, wetlands and industrial spaces such as factories and market gardens.

POSSIBLE READINGS

The combination of high-fidelity colour and low-fidelity optics in conjunction with artificial low-light sources produces unique images with distinctive qualities. Denotatively, the images contain both brightly and dimly lit elements. The colour gamut is made up of saturated hues and primaries. They are sharp in the middle and blur towards the edges. Some of the images register light flaring off the plastic lens as

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streaks across the image. The grass is green and the sky is usually rendered purple, as it is a different colour temperature to the privileged street lamps.

Subjectively, I find the images dislocated and unfamiliar. Ironically, the large facades are rendered small, miniaturised, perhaps resembling architects' models and dolls' houses. They invite a child-like perspective. Their freshly installed gardens are further 'polished' by the lens. The colours don't belong. I've never seen them at night before. The artificial lighting mimics a film set and heightens the drama. The framing and point of focus highlight excessive features, symbolising, even fetishising them in the process. As in much photographic practice, you are positioned as voyeur, stalking the subject. Your eye is drawn towards the middle. There is a simulated dream-like movement that reinforces a sublimation of beauty. The unfamiliar produces something bigger than what the mind can immediately comprehend. A distinct lack of rationalism promotes romanticism. It is quite different to the real thing.

CONCLUSIONS

Referring back to my initial reaction, my images don't produce the same anxieties as standing in front of a McMansion for the first time. Ironically, after imbuing the subjects with a sense of gothic drama, the link to excessive fictional anxieties I first felt is both highlighted and made less formidable. By re-presenting McMansions as rich, dream-like backdrops, it locates them further away from any real sense of 'home'. They are pushed outside of Mori's 'Uncanny Valley', less capable as acting as a vector to the repressed. This is aided by the simulated miniaturisation of their architecture. Borrowing from Levi-Strauss's (1972) theory, the scaled down McMansions don't put up the same perceptual resistance; instead they invite closer examination. Much like the de-familiarising effects of Shklovsky's 'Ostranenie', by re-working the signifier, the signified needs to be re-read by the viewer.

Through this investigation I have found some common binding themes between conceptual frameworks and my artistic practice. It has both crystallised and informed my initial concept. By providing an alternative lexicon of words and ideas, I was able to shift from a position of 'the critic', to a more reflective, engaged position. I have moved beyond my initial idea that, by employing excessive fictional symbols, McMansions are homes that can seem unhomely. Whilst the facades do act as an agent for the uncanny, evoking cultural anxieties, they also signify a struggle for identity within the new city.

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By overtly displaying status, fantasy, and identity, it shows how cultural questions about 'home' and belonging haven't been answered architecturally. For me, McMansions can be seen as the latest re-working of what constitutes the metaphoric home. The struggle for identity that started with colonisation, less than two hundred years ago, is still up for grabs. At the start of this investigation, I wasn't sure what didn't belong, the McMansions or me. Now, a third choice is apparent, that neither belongs. As the new city continually re-invents itself, it has limited historic referents. A sense of home and belonging evaporates with every re-incarnation of suburbia. The *Australian Dream* expressed in suburban reality never amount to the same thing, and the difference is uncanny.

Image #1 Eden caprice 2009

Image #2 Buckingham 360 2009

Image #3 Constantine Contempo 2009

Image #4 Birchgrove Capri manor 2008

Image #5 Newhaven Grande (with study) 2009

Image #6 Ultimo Outlook 2009

Image #7 Downing upon Avon 2009

Image #8 Piazza Estate 2008

Image #9 Fairhaven Retreat 2009

Image #10 Tuscan Altezza 2009

Image #11 Sirroco Vantage 2008

Image #12 Durham Defiance 2009

Image #13 Enigma Sunrise 2009

Image #14 The Rose Common 2009

Image #15 Como Plantation 2009

Image #16 Tara Confederate 2008

Image #17 Riviera Guest 2009

Image #18 Assisi Standard 2008

Image #19 Centro Boulevard 2009

Image #20 Sirroco Daydream 2008

Image #21 Cunard Atlantic 2009

Image #22 Freedom Vegas 2008

Image #23 Milano Series II 2009

Image #24 Nautilus Garden 2009

Image #25 La Rive Droite 2009

Image #26 Revolution Mk11 2009

Image #27 Montagna Close 2008

Image #28 Scarlett Breeze 2008

Image #29 Moritz Resort 2009

Image #30 Parkside Romance 2009

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