

## **Taking Shelter: Teaching and Learning in the House that Technology Built**

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### **Abstract**

In *The Real World of Technology*, Ursula Franklin draws on the metaphor of the “house that technology has built” to illustrate the all-encompassing and pervasive environment of technology. In this paper, I take this metaphor literally by turning to our transformed houses and homes during the pandemic. By way of illustration, I draw on my experiences teaching online, which began in March 2020. In Fall 2020, I designed and taught a 4<sup>th</sup>-year undergraduate course with the title “Taking Shelter” which gave students an opportunity to work through and reflect on the changing nature of house and home, while calling attention to the transformed technological environment in which we were working. Through attention to the places we live and work in everyday, the paper imagines a foundation built on ecological principles that takes account of technology as environment, milieu and system.

As I see it, technology has built the house in which we all live. The house is continually being extended and remodelled. More and more of human life takes place within its walls, so that today there is hardly any human activity that does not occur within this house. (Franklin, 1999)

Ursula Franklin begins and ends her Massey Lecture series with the metaphor of the house that technology built. Her lectures take the listener through the house, exploring its foundations, alterations and demolitions, while also noting who can move through some spaces, but not others. The rooms of the house represent different technologies, which exist only in connection with the other rooms of the house, joined through hallways and corridors. For Franklin, all was not well in the “House of Technology” in part because of the lack of attention, scholarly or otherwise, to the “interactive structuring of society and technology” ([1997] 2006, p. 217). This interconnectedness, she writes, cannot be explained by many of the common-sense approaches to technology: cause and effect, or the valuing of technologies as good, bad, or neutral (1990, p. 15). Following the work of Foucault, Mumford and Ellul, Franklin was interested in technology as a system, environment or milieu ([1997] 2006, p. 219). As the house we all live in, Franklin’s metaphor captures the ubiquity and pervasiveness of technology, particularly digital technologies, and as a “global habitat” in which we all live (1990, p. 115) she reworks McLuhan’s global village, but rooted in everyday practice rather than utopian musings.

My aim with this paper is to take Franklin’s architectural understanding of technology, not just as metaphor and mapping strategy, but as a way to explore the complex intricacies between technology and our actual houses and homes, which during the pandemic have taken on new meanings as people were called on to “shelter in place.” As a way of examining the “limited settings where one puts technology in context, because context is what matters most,” (Franklin 1999, p. 15) I look to the teaching and learning environment during the pandemic, which, for most of us, took place in our basements, bedrooms and kitchens.

In the Fall of 2020, as the second wave of the pandemic began to take hold, I taught a 4<sup>th</sup>-year undergraduate course in Visual Culture at the University of Toronto Mississauga with the title “Taking Shelter.” The course, which I specifically designed to be taken online during the pandemic, gave us the opportunity to reflect on the practices of living and learning at home: to turn the privatized experiences of sheltering-in-place into a collective conversation among a small group of students. In her work, Franklin insisted on the link between knowledge learned in the classroom and an understanding of the problems of the day. This “quest for knowledge and understanding” should be the ultimate aim of university education ([1994] 2006, p. 139). This was how this course developed: using theories of house, home and shelter as a way to understand the privatized spaces of the pandemic.

The house that technology built is at once the global habitat in which we have all been collectively teaching, learning, shopping and communicating, and the actual privatized spaces that those of us have been lucky enough to retreat to and work from during the worst waves of the pandemic. In the first part of the paper, I draw out this parallel more specifically with regard to Franklin's work as well as the material I drew upon in designing the course. I was not reading Ursula Franklin's work while preparing for the course, but her work has provided a way to contextualize the pandemic and our shelters as a historical moment that sheds light on the house that technology is building—that is, an opportunity to reflect on the all-encompassing nature of technology.

In the second part, I discuss the class more specifically. My aim is not necessarily to discuss the new practices of online teaching, which for the majority of teachers was not a choice, but to focus on the opportunity that the emergency turn to online learning presented for examining the complex relationships between technology and the home. In the concluding section, I come back to Franklin's discussion of ecology as an alternative way of understanding the global habitat.

### **“No Exit”**

If we imagine the interdependent technologies as rooms in a house, connected by doorways and corridors, then I hold that this House of Technology is not well lit; it seems to be full of trap doors, and it lacks exits, windows, and most of all, signs or directions. (Franklin, 1999)

The house that lacks exits, windows, signs or directions is a sign not only of technology's all-encompassing nature, but also the near impossibility of finding a space outside of the dominant approaches to technology. For Franklin, these dominant approaches focused on efficiency, progress, convenience, and production are the foundations upon which the house was built and the most difficult to change. Franklin's work attempts to provide some signposts and directions, to highlight technology as part of an interconnected and interdependent environment. Too often, our common-sense approach to housing is the stand-alone, *detached* dwelling. But the houses of our urban worlds are anything, but detached: they are attached in myriad ways to the collective flows that make cities work: water, natural gas, fibre-optic cables, sewage, etc. A city, like a house, is not defined by its infrastructural flows, but without them, it becomes no more than a barren shelter. It is here where the boundaries of Franklin's metaphor bend into reality: “there is hardly any activity that does not occur within this house” (1990, p. 11). There is some irony in reading this sentence in the wake of the pandemic, and I think it best illustrates how Franklin's metaphor can operate on multiple levels.

The house that technology built has served intensely privatized lives during the pandemic, as at-home workers enjoyed the benefits of capitalist consumerism thanks to the entangled

network of internet connections and the powerful devices that allow people to be both home-bound and mobile at the same time. We have become acutely aware of how much the house that technology built encompasses all of our daily tasks, fulfilling the wildest dreams of information society prophets like Alvin Toffler: There is a fitting irony to Toffler's aptly named *The Third Wave* (1981) where he envisions people working from home in "electronic cottages." At the same time, these "cottages" of today depend on precarious labour of so-called essential workers who had to leave their homes every day to work at Amazon distribution centres.

In this way, the house is a deceptive metaphor, because normally thought of as a respite from the outside world, the house is in fact inextricably connected to local and global networks of information, goods and people. When technology becomes so intimately intertwined with our everyday lives, there is no exit, and windows are just as likely to evoke the spaces on a computer screen as they are the physical ones we open and close.

During the pandemic the home has become all at once escape, exit strategy and shelter. Working and learning from home turned the home into a workshop where the boundaries between domestic and work-related duties dissolved. Primary school teachers working from home, many of whom are women, had to placate and often entertain their own small children, who were tired of looking at a screen, while teenagers were stuck learning from their bedrooms. With nuclear family life increasingly claustrophobic, the home became a place of deep emotional, financial and bodily anxiety.

### **Living in the Breach**

What makes the classroom precious...is that our need for sense-making has turned us from syllabus towards crisis and we've been able to think together about that crisis even as it has moved us online.

--Andrew Herscher, "Notes On Pandemic Teaching: 3," in Pries et al., 2020.

This idea of being at home, but not feeling quite *at home* spurred my interest in not simply writing about this topic, but making shelter a basis for classroom discussion. As a starting point I turned to *Take Shelter* (2011), an appropriately titled film for the pandemic, but which director Jeff Nichols wrote in 2008 in the wake of the financial crisis and the palpable anxiety that many people around the world felt. The film centres on Curtis and his wife and young daughter. Curtis's recurring nightmares of a brown, oily rain begin to impede on and impact his mental health, the fear and anxiety leading him to take out a risky second mortgage on his house to build out and refurbish the storm shelter on his rural Iowa property. Curtis's nightmares get worse, he loses his job and his friends, and then is advised by a psychologist to take a vacation with his family. Far from his shelter, the storm comes, just like in Curtis's nightmares, but this time, the line between nightmare and reality has become blurred, as we are not sure if this

storm is real or in Curtis's mind. *Take Shelter* weaves together financial, psychological and environmental anxiety. It was this anxiety that drew me to the film as a teaching tool for understanding the anxiety of the current moment and the anxiety that surrounds shelter: be it nuclear fallout shelters, sheltering in place during the pandemic, or the increasing housing precarity in cities around the world.

As a way of drawing out the anxiety around shelter, the class looked at the existing history of ideas around the *unheimlich* that Freud expounded upon in his seminal essay on the uncanny ([1919] 1976). The uncanny arises, writes Freud, when the homely and familiar turns into the *unheimlich*, literally the unfamiliar, unhomely or the unsettled. These ideas have been taken up in the context of media, technology and architecture by a number of theorists, including Anthony Vidler (1992), Beatriz Colomina (1994) and Scott McQuire (2008). They were the key starting points for *Taking Shelter*.

In the first full online semester, which began in May 2020 at the University of Toronto, I found myself teaching two online courses for the first time. As a critical theorist of media and technology, I felt remiss if I didn't find a way to reflect on the virtual classroom, and give students the same opportunity. It would be foolish to think that education—exams, lectures, seminars and discussions—could simply be transferred to an online environment, as if the technologies were simply neutral tools. *Taking Shelter* would be a way for both myself and the students to reflect on the new environment created by online learning, while also allowing us to work through our own anxieties about staying at home during the pandemic, and to address the politics and privileges and having a safe space in which to retreat.

The small class of 10 students, like in-person seminars, offered a degree of reciprocity that I did not experience in any of the other, much larger online classes I taught. For Franklin, reciprocity—not feedback—is essential to any communication, and if there was one common complaint about remote learning it was this: the lack of reciprocity and genuine exchange between students and teachers, particularly in large format classes, where students kept their cameras off creating a wall of black squares on the Zoom interface. With the lack of reciprocity comes what architecture professor Jesse LeCavalier calls “the isolated and individualized consumption of educational ‘content,’” facilitated by recorded lectures and PowerPoint slides (Murphy & Scanlon et al., 2020). The small-scale seminar format, a rarity in undergraduate education, assured that even if we were isolated in our homes, we could still come together for a discussion that would take as its basis this very isolation.

For the final project, students were to engage with one of the class themes by reflecting on the uncanny technological world they were inhabiting at the time. In the end there was an eclectic mix of work: a pandemic diary that focused on the role of screens, a short film on the in-between urban landscape of Mississauga, a photo-essay on people's personal work-live

spaces, a podcast meditation on the failing infrastructure of a house, a video on quarantining in a Chinese hotel, and a mock Instagram account that took on the work/home life balance.

These were some of the ideas foremost on students' minds as they composed responses to the film *Take Shelter* as part of their first assignment and as they further reflected on the course themes throughout the semester:

I feel almost claustrophobic in this space. A place of leisure has quickly transformed into an alienated and unfamiliar space. There is no fine line or boundary distinguishing whether my home is a place for comfort or work and because of this, I find myself seeking other places and people to let go and be vulnerable with. I find myself searching for shelter elsewhere.

- Vidhi

For a lot of students, the bedroom is no longer just a place for sleeping - it is a lecture hall, office, study room, and a place for relaxation. This inability to establish physical boundaries between spaces for work and play has forced me into a headspace where I feel like I am 'always on', thus heightening my inescapable feelings of anxiety caused by the virus.

- Samishka

The ability to articulate those redefined boundaries for myself became intrinsically linked with my own mental well-being.

- Tasneem

The physical existence of the home cannot define the house because when the presence of technology breaches the space of the home, its walls are no longer contained by physical boundaries.

- Julia

Living in the breach of boundaries: the disappearing and seemingly comforting boundaries of private and public life loomed large in the students' responses to the "technological uncanny" (McQuire 2008), and the difficulty of finding spaces outside of the house of technology. For these students, mental health and anxiety figured prominently in dealing with the breach, a state of mind which demanded that we confuse spaces, that the home no longer be a safe retreat from the outside world.

Although most of us would prefer to be teaching in person rather than online, in the case of *Taking Shelter*, I tried to embrace the format. Instead of PowerPoint presentations, I offered short podcast lectures with some accompanying images to offer some context and a basis for our live seminar discussions. And what better way to reflect on the pervasiveness of technology by working and learning in that very environment?

### Technology's House: Liveable habitat or techno-dump?

The pandemic has accentuated crises in care, the inequalities of patriarchal capitalism, and the sheer imbalance between those of us who have the luxury of home to shelter and work from and those who must go to work every day to allow the rest of us to stay at home. At the same time, multiple anxieties—financial, psychological and ecological—pervade the contemporary situation, whether that is about taking shelter from the virus or taking shelter from climate catastrophe. The final scenes of *Take Shelter* illustrate the futility of trying to escape from the coming storms. What is the alternative?

For Franklin, all was not well in the house that technology built, and her lectures were a call to rebuild the house along lines of fairness, justice, and ecology. In this way, we might think of Franklin's house of technology as the *oikos*, the ancient Greek word that means house or dwelling and from which the word ecology is derived. In the final chapter to *The Real World of Technology*, Franklin notes that ecological approaches to the house that technology built are some of the "non-blueprint concepts" that offer "constructive alterations to the house that technology has built" (1990, p. 116).

In my classes, I have tried to attend to both the collective global habitat and the houses that we all occupy to draw students into a wider awareness of technology as system, environment and practice. As Franklin shows, unlearning some of our standard building practices when it comes to defining and understanding technology is a crucial step on the way to a global livable habitat. Is there a way to seek shelter from the house that technology built when paradoxically there are few if any spaces outside of that house? Rather than seek some sort of temporary, or permanent exit, Franklin preferred a different a way of thinking about the real world of technology as a collective habitat: "All the environments of this planet—the natural, the built, and the engineered—are so intimately and irreversibly intertwined that there must be a livable world either for all or for none." ([1994] 2006, p. 144).

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