

# Robin Evans's Empty Room Collective Living in the 1970s and the Problem of Domestic Realism

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Vince Hetreed in his living room at No 19-25 Tolmers Square.  
Photograph courtesy of Nick Wates.

Robin Evans is perhaps most well-known for his 1978 article “Figures, Doors and Passages,” which argued that the corridor plan “finally displaced” what he called “the matrix of connected rooms.”<sup>01</sup> He dramatized this transformation by suggesting that the change was “*not*” the result of “a long, predictable evolutionary development of vernacular forms” but was “sudden and purposeful” and “came apparently out of the blue.”<sup>02</sup> He was quite specific about the date: 1650-67, when Roger Pratt designed Coleshill House in Berkshire, which Evans described as the “most thoroughgoing application of this novel arrangement.”<sup>03</sup> The purpose of the corridor, Evans suggested, was linked to a new puritan morality which was spreading throughout the West, bringing with it a transformed understanding of the proper relationship between individual privacy and collective sociality. Prior to this date, Evans argued that domestic architecture had been characterized as a kind of undetermined stage set in which all kinds of convivial, and even carnal, contacts between groups of people had taken place. After the late seventeenth century however, activities in the home began to be separated from one another, becoming compartmentalized, isolated, disconnected, and functionally differentiated. What follows is an attempt to shed some additional light on Evans’s concern about this transformation. It does so by placing Evans’s writing from the 1970s in a larger personal, social, and historical context to learn more about some of the issues that Evans was trying to grapple with, which he never finalized in a conclusive manner, and which persist as crucial questions in the present.

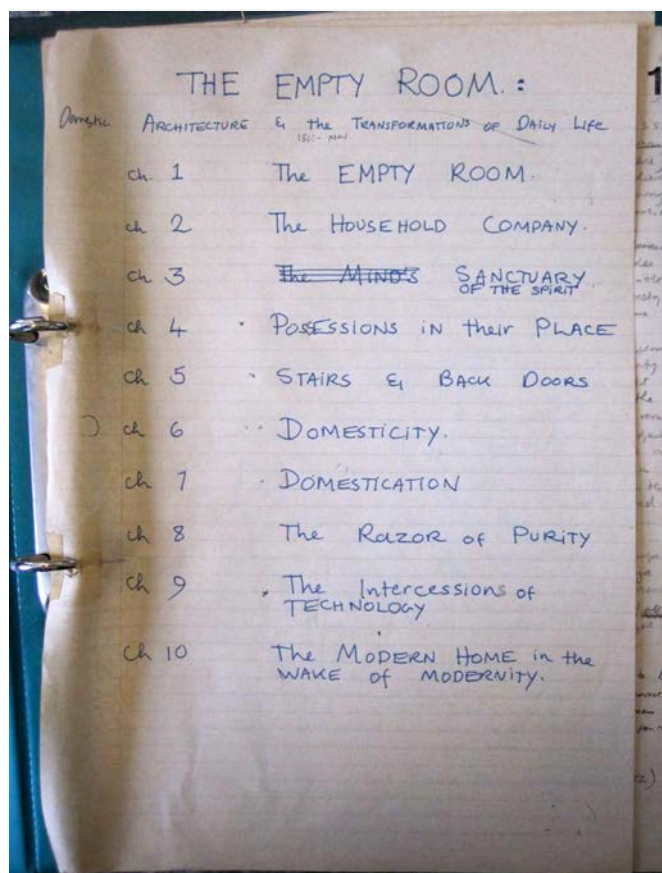
Evans’s beautifully composed argument became canonical within the

01 Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages,” *Architectural Design* 48, no.4 (1978): 278.

02 Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages,” 272.

03 *Ibid.*, 272.

discipline and still circulates widely within the field of architecture.<sup>04</sup> Yet the persuasive nature of Evans's writing style masks the curious fact that the author himself was not personally committed to the normative claims his argument advanced, nor their politics; captured in his conclusion, "there is surely another kind of architecture," Evans wrote, "that would seek to give full play to the things which have been so carefully masked by its anti-type; an architecture arising out of the deep fascination that draws people towards others; an architecture that recognizes passion, carnality and sociality."<sup>05</sup> Even if the matrix plan could be brought back into common use and even if the corridor were to be eradicated from domestic architecture, reconnecting occupants in ways that might overcome their modern conceptions of privacy, it is not entirely clear that, Evans, in the end felt it was *desirable* to do so.



THE EMPTY ROOM:	
DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE & THE TRANSFORMATION OF DAILY LIFE (1500 - PRESENT)	
ch 1	The EMPTY ROOM.
ch 2	The HOUSEHOLD COMPANY.
ch 3	<del>The MIND'S</del> SANCTUARY OF THE SPIRIT
ch 4	• POSSESSIONS IN THEIR PLACE
ch 5	• STAIRS & BACK DOORS
ch 6	• DOMESTICITY.
ch 7	• DOMESTICATION
ch 8	The RAZOR OF PURITY
ch 9	• The Intercessions of TECHNOLOGY
ch 10	The MODERN HOME in the WAKE of MODERNITY.

Table of contents for the ring binder, *The Empty Room: Domestic Architecture and the Transformation of Daily Life (1500 - Present)*. Image courtesy of Janet Evans.

As Evans acknowledged at the outset, his article was "rather crude and schematic." In a small biographical note affixed to "Figures Doors and Passageways" he made clear that he was, at that time, "preparing a book on the rise of domestic architecture and the transformation of family life between 1500 and the present."<sup>06</sup> Although slim and incomplete—only 30 pages in total—a binder of notes with the working title, *The Empty Room: Domestic Architecture and the Transformation of Daily Life*, gives a rough indication of the intended shape of the book (Figure 1). Judging by the publication dates of references cited in the binder, Evans likely

04 Google Scholar gives 313 as the citation number for the article within its index. And a fourth reprint of the book in which the article appears was reprinted again in 2024.

05 Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages," 278.

06 Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages," 267.

began compiling these notes no sooner than mid-1977. In April 1978, he was awarded a substantial grant from the Nuffield Foundation for £6,340 (£45,500 in today's money), enough to support him for at least a year to work on the project.<sup>07</sup> It is likely that he paused work on the book to focus on publishing some of the material he was working with, which he did in “Figures, Doors and Passages” and “Rookeries and Model Dwellings: English Housing Reform and the Moralities of Private Space,”<sup>08</sup> because the notes show what look like one of the first encounters with artifacts and sources that then received more detailed treatment in these two articles. Yet his biography in the AA Projects Review from 1980-81 advertised that the book was still forthcoming. At this point, Evans described the book as not merely about the “transformation” of daily life, but more specifically about its “*pacification*.”<sup>09</sup>

### ROBIN EVANS'S EMPTY ROOM

In the section that follows, I attempt a reconstruction of the book going systematically through the ten proposed chapters; at least as much as this is possible from what are, in effect, merely pages listing: the titles of paintings, buildings, poems, and books; quotations from various sources; and brief commentaries. Nonetheless, the notes present something of an overarching structure of a larger history that Evans planned to tell. They clarify what characterized convivial forms of domesticity in Evans's mind by describing such things as friendship, human contact, the sharing of different activities within the same room and the sharing of beds. They show how, historically, such conviviality had been pacified by means of architecture. And they address what kind of architecture might best facilitate the return of convivial forms of domesticity in the future.



Dirk Hals, *Woman Tearing up a Letter* (1631)

07 According to the minutes of the 29 April 1978 meeting of the Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation, “Dr R M Evans (Unit Master at the Architectural Association School of Architecture)” received “£6,340 for one year, to carry out a study of architecture and the transformations of domestic life (1590–1900).”

08 Robin Evans, “Rookeries and Model Dwellings: English Housing Reform and the Moralities of Private Space,” *Architectural Association Quarterly* 10 (1978): 25-35.

09 Robin Evans, *AA Projects Review 1980-81*, (1983), 33.

Chapter one, “The Empty Room,” would have begun evocatively with Dirk Hals’s painting, “Woman Tearing up a Letter”, using the 1631 painting to illustrate his claim that domestic space was once undetermined, and was therefore capable of hosting different kinds of activities in the same space simultaneously. He would have claimed that the real subject of the painting was not the figure but the empty room itself. Evans also cited in his notes Pieter Janssens Elinga’s “Reading Woman” (1668–70), which depicts a largely empty scene and suggested that other seventeenth century Dutch paintings, such as those by Vermeer or Pieter De Hooch, might also illustrate the same point. The “empty room” of his title thus named the prelapsarian state of domestic architecture, when the generosity of a void allowed for a greater variety and complexity of social life. It was this state of domesticity that would be “pacified” by the apparatus of a meaner kind of spatial compartmentalization, the functions of which would each become more narrowly specified.

Chapter two, “The Household Company,” would have then offered textual sources to illustrate the qualities of conviviality that such generous rooms afforded. One passage taken from a letter by Denis Diderot to Sophie Volland would have done the job, offering “a picture of French daily life among the well to do”:<sup>10</sup>

We were all at that time in the gloomy and magnificent drawing room; at our various occupations, we made a very pretty picture.

By the window which looks on to the gardens, Grimm was being painted and Madame d’Epinay was leaning on the back of the painter’s chair.

Someone was sitting on a stool lower down and drawing his profile in pencil. It is a charming profile. Any woman would be tempted to see if it is a good likeness.

Monsieur de Saint-Lambert was sitting in a corner reading the latest pamphlet which I sent you.

I was playing chess with Madame d’Houdetot. Good old Madame d’Esclavelles, Madame d’Epinay’s mother, was sitting surrounded by all the children and talking with them and their tutors.

Two sisters of the person who was painting my friend were doing embroidery, one in her hand, the other on a frame.

And a third was trying a piece by Scarlatti on the harpsichord.<sup>11</sup>

Evans commented on this passage and remarked, with a tone of amazement, that *sixteen* people in total were gathered in this single room and were undertaking so many different and diverse activities—painting, music, reading, playing games, talking, learning, embroidering. And yet, as he commented, they do not seem to perceive the overlap of these different activities as conflicting with one another in any way.

Another source from 1639 would have indicated the carnal nature of bodily contact that Evans imagined in domestic spaces before the reformation. The book he found gave a brief account of a seventeenth century student at the University of Cambridge who was given lodgings by his Master. But lodgings did not mean being given a room. It meant being given half a bed. Evans wrote down the following passage in his notes: “This Master Downhale having very convenient lodgings over the school, took such liking to me, as he made me his bedfellow. This bedfellowship begat in him familiarity and gentleness towards me; and in me towards him

10 Robin Evans, “Notes for The Empty Room.” Janet Evans personal collection.

11 Denis Diderot, *Diderot’s letters to Sophie Volland*, trans. by Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55.

reverence and love; which made me also love my book.”<sup>12</sup>

Chapter three, “The Sanctuary of the Spirit,” would, for example, take the Renaissance studiolo as the source for the single access terminal rooms that modern corridors would connect. He would have written about St. Jerome as a figure that embodies the relationship between inward study and outward connection to the divine. He would have noted that the fifteenth century *studiolo* of the Ducal Palace in Urbino could be taken as an instantiation of a certain contemplative architectural diagram, writing that it “faces out towards the landscape, away from the courtyard round which all the other rooms face,” and that “the room is entered from one side only, not passed through like the rest.”<sup>13</sup> And, of the sixteenth century studiolo from the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, he wrote that “it is the *most connected room* in the palace because of its seclusion.”<sup>14</sup> There is something in Evans’s argument that might be said to owe a debt to Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber had argued that the ethical norms of modern life under capitalism arose out of deeper spiritual contexts, and that what drives modern individuals inwards in a puritanical move towards self-control is a displacement of a former orientation towards contact with God. While Weber is not mentioned in the notes, Evans nonetheless advanced a similar thesis when he argued that bourgeois domestic norms were produced by a new spiritual realignment: between isolation and goodness, on the one hand, and between sociality and immorality, on the other.

Yet while this Weberian reading of isolation as seemingly virtuous might suggest a certain possibility that the very study and contemplation that Evans himself enjoyed so much in his own life might be justified in some larger spiritual sense, he countered this view by drawing upon Erwin Panofsky’s interpretation of Albrecht Durer’s engravings of Melancholia I (1514) as illustrative of another kind of human temperament.<sup>15</sup> Evans considered that the popularity of the figure of the Melancholic among artists and writers in the seventeenth century might have helped to legitimate a certain kind of misanthropic behavior, insofar as it enabled time spent on one’s own to become positively valued as a sign of creative genius. Yet Evans suggested in his notes that he would have used Panofsky’s words to counter this positive valuation, describing the melancholic in more negative terms as “awkward, miserly, spiteful, greedy, malicious, cowardly, faithless, irreverent and drawsy.” Evans added his own words at this moment, writing that the melancholic was a figure who “avoids company and despises the opposite sex and is inclined to solitary study; a mean pathological picture of a type.”<sup>16</sup>

Chapter four, “Possessions in their Place,” would have attempted to locate the first moments when possessions began to populate the empty room due to the new collecting habits of aristocrats in the seventeenth century. The architectural object of his attention would have been the gallery, and again literary sources would have been drawn either from Andrew Marvell’s poem, “The Gallery,” (1650) or from Diderot’s *Letters to Sophie Volland* once more. The observation was later advanced by Evans in his 1989 article, “The Developed Surface,” which argues that where furniture and paintings first lined the walls of a room such that the “empty space within ... was left un-described and untouched” one could observe the “increasing encroachment of furniture onto the floor space” during the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The fourth chapter would have likely attempted

12 Evans quotes from R. Willis, “Mount Tabor,” though he saw the quote when reading John Dover Wilson, *Life in Shakespeare’s England* (Pelican, 1944), 78.

13 Evans, “Notes for The Empty Room.”

14 Ibid.

15 Fred Scott relayed a comment from Evans to this effect, “as he said to me, I love concentration.” Fred Scott, Interview with the author, July 14, 2012.

16 Evans, “Notes for The Empty Room.” Quoting from Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 158.

17 Robin Evans, “The Developed Surface: An Enquiry into the Brief life of an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Technique,” *9H* (1989): 134, 142. *The fact that Evans acknowledged support of the Nuffield grant in this article shows its connection with his notes for “The Empty Room.”*

to begin this story as far back as the very collection of objects as items of display from the Renaissance, which brought them to the walls in the first place, and onwards to the advent of their conception as possessions or commodities which he saw occupants as developing emotional relationships with. "I love places where those who are dear to me have been; I love to touch the things that have surrounded them and breathe the air they have breathed," reads a passage from Diderot that Evans copied to his notes. Thus, where chapter three would have probed the spiritual dimensions of solitude, chapter four would have probed the relationships between the solitary individual and the things they gather around them.

Chapter five, "Stairs and Back Doors," would have narrated the emergence of "new ways" of domestic planning, as Donald Lupton described them in 1632, that involved several architectural "tricks."<sup>18</sup> Here Evans would have focused on circulation in the plans of English country houses around the mid-seventeenth century, but also on any other architectural means of controlling connections between people such as peep holes and hatches as described in the literary sources he was consulting. He would have begun, for example, with Lupton noting the novelty of: "Peeping windows for the ladies to view what doings there are in the hall, a buttery hatch that's kept locked, clean tables, and a porter that locks the gates in dinner time."<sup>19</sup> Evans would have also situated his analysis of various architectural instruments of control within the context of the larger call of Archbishop William Laud for "uniformity and decency" in the country during his reforms of the Church of England at the same time.

The buildings that would have received special attention to exemplify these new forms of rationalized circulation would have been Roger Pratt's, "Coleshill," Berkshire (1650), Peter Mills, "Thorpe Hall," Hunts (1653-6), and John Webb's, "Amesbury" (1661). Evans saw all three alongside one another when leafing through the pages of his 1970 edition of John Summerson's, *British Architecture*, (1530-1830).<sup>20</sup> Summerson makes no note of the unusual nature of circulation in these plans as being worthy of attention, remarking instead on their architect's pupilage, friendships, or stylistic debts to Inigo Jones, on questions of attribution, judgments about proportions, and historical reference. It was Evans who, as he put it in the opening sentence of "Figures, Doors and Passages," found the "deepest mystery" in such "familiar things" as the circulation of the plan, and who found in their transformation at this moment the manifestation of a key change in social life:

The rooms no longer string together in chains but attach to the passage which tunnels through the center of the building. You see the room you occupy and no other. The life of the household takes place on the other side of the passage walls, out of sight. The interior is far more particular and partial in terms of experience and that its planning has been unified by the device of the passage.<sup>21</sup>

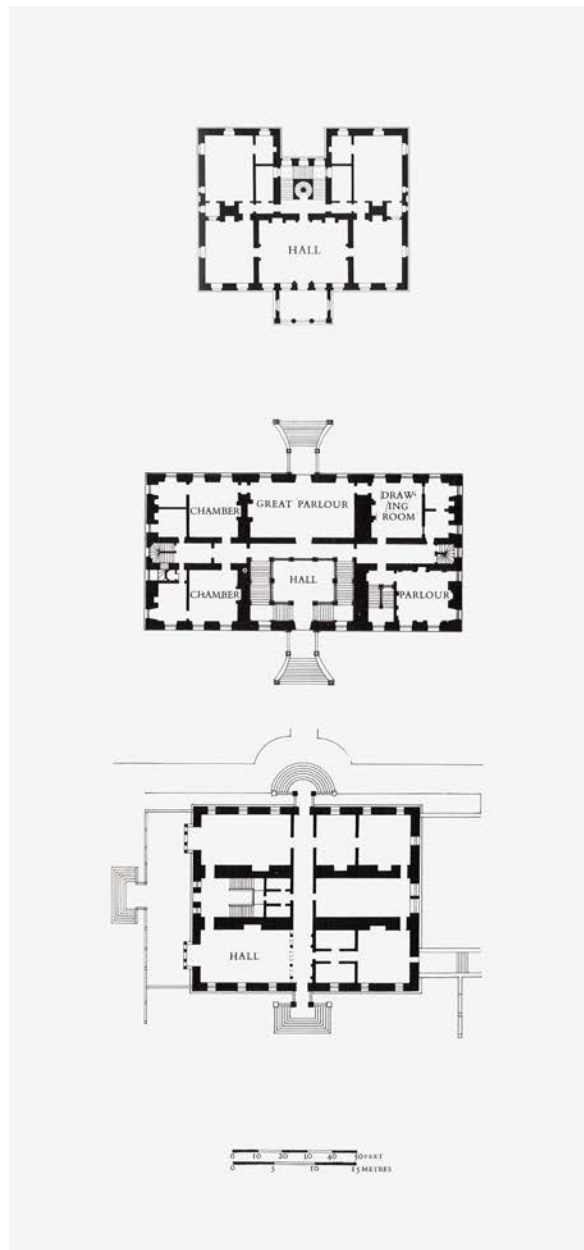
While these three buildings illustrate the emergence of the corridor, they were in fact still poised halfway between the corridor plan and the matrix plan, mixing elements of both. Occupants and servants could bypass activities in the rooms by using the corridor, or alternatively, they could move through the set of doorways connecting each room directly.

18 Donald Lupton, *London and Country Carbonadoed and Quartered into Several Characters* (1632).

19 Lupton, *London and Country Carbonadoed* (1632). Evans was quoting from page p287 of his edition, though I have not been able to locate what edition that would have been.

20 John Summerson, *British Architecture (1530-1830)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 147-167.

21 Evans, "Notes for The Empty Room."



(Top) John Webb, Amesbury, Wilts (1661) from *Vitruvius Britannicus vol.3* (1720);  
 (Middle) Roger Pratt, Coleshill, Berks, (c.1650) from *Vitruvius Britannicus vol.5* (1720);  
 (Bottom) Peter Mills, Thorpe Hall, Hunts (1653-6) From Arthur William, Hakewill,  
*General Plan and External Details, with Picturesque Illustrations, of Thorpe Hall,  
 Peterborough* (1852), reproduced in John Summerson, *British Architecture (1530-1830)*  
 (Yale University Press, 1970).

Chapter six, “Domesticity,” would have attempted to characterize what historians commonly refer to as the “Culture of Domesticity” or the “Cult of True Womanhood” that began to emerge from the late-eighteenth to late-nineteenth centuries. Evans would have referred to Diderot’s letters once more, to a passage where he recounted an argument between his brother and sister concerning what kind of domestic life each of them preferred, whether one with “lavish” gatherings and plenty of company or one composed of small gatherings that were described as “decent.” Here, Evans would have seen Diderot’s sister’s preference as defining what was to follow in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He would have argued that the culture of domesticity emphasized comfort and a certain freedom to pursue one’s private thoughts without disturbance. He noted a quote from Adolf Loos who said, “The work of art wants to tear you out of your comfortable existence. The house is to serve your comfort. The work of art

is revolutionary, the house is conservative.”<sup>22</sup> And he would have paired this with a quote from C.F.A. Voysey stressing that the house should be a space in which one's inner thoughts were not disturbed: “Every object in such a space is perceived by the eye and immediately understood and classified; thus it no longer disturbs, and one is completely free to wonder in the light of one's own or the tempest of one's thoughts.”<sup>23</sup>

Chapter seven, “Domestication,” would have addressed housing reform movements from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in which various authorities offered their confident opinion that the immoral, dangerous, and unsanitary nature of the lower classes was linked to the overcrowded and mixed nature of their housing and that separating dwellings, rooms, and occupants from one another by passages, partitions, and functionally specified zones for occupation would improve their behavior.

Robin Evans's notes for *The Empty Room* are dated from this section. Here Evans cites a quote from an unfinished 1977 thesis titled, “Chadwick's Bentham,” by Barbara Chu, one of his AA students—who will later become significant to our story—and he used the quote again, along with many of his other notes from this section, in his 1978 article, “Rookeries and Model Dwellings.” Evans had worked on Bentham during his doctoral studies at Essex University and he knew that, in addition to prisons, Bentham's archive was also full of material related to housing reform. It was Evans who then suggested to Chu that she look at Bentham's archive at UCL in preparation for her own Ph.D. Upon graduation from the AA in June 1977, Chu had received a RIBA research grant and was working in the British Library on the history of British housing reform. It was Chu who, that year, encouraged Evans to find funding to support his research, helping him apply for the Nuffield grant. She had discovered that Edwin Chadwick was a great follower of Bentham and was instrumental in the 1848 Health Act, which transformed the way domestic buildings could be laid out. As Chu recalls:

He knew everything I was working on. And we were in the libraries together, so we would come out and have coffee together and talk about what we just read. We read things like Philippe Aries, Ferdinand Braudel, and Michel Foucault. We were discussing what the Victorians wanted to do about society. The 18th century was very loose and then suddenly you get to the 19th century and people said: “We have to clean up these pockets of immorality and uncleanness; morally, and spiritually, and physically.” The descriptions of bad living were always laundry draped everywhere and fireplaces emitting smoke onto the laundry because everything was happening in one room. So, the Victorians said, “separate everything, have a separate kitchen, have a separate scullery.” The idea here was to segregate functions. That was an awful idea in domestic architecture.<sup>24</sup>

Evans would have then moved onto the early twentieth century, showing how these Victorian reform ideals influenced modern architecture. For example, he took note of a particular description found in Benjamin Andrew's, *Economics of the Household*, (1923) that specified the kinds of separations between members of a household that were needed to avoid the ill effects of overcrowding.<sup>25</sup> He found similar remarks echoing these

22 Adolf Loos, Stuttgart Lecture, 12 Nov 1926, cited in Ludwig Munz and Gustav Kunstler, *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 20.

23 As quoted in Julius Posner, “Muthesius as Architect,” *Lotus 9* (February 1975): 104-115.

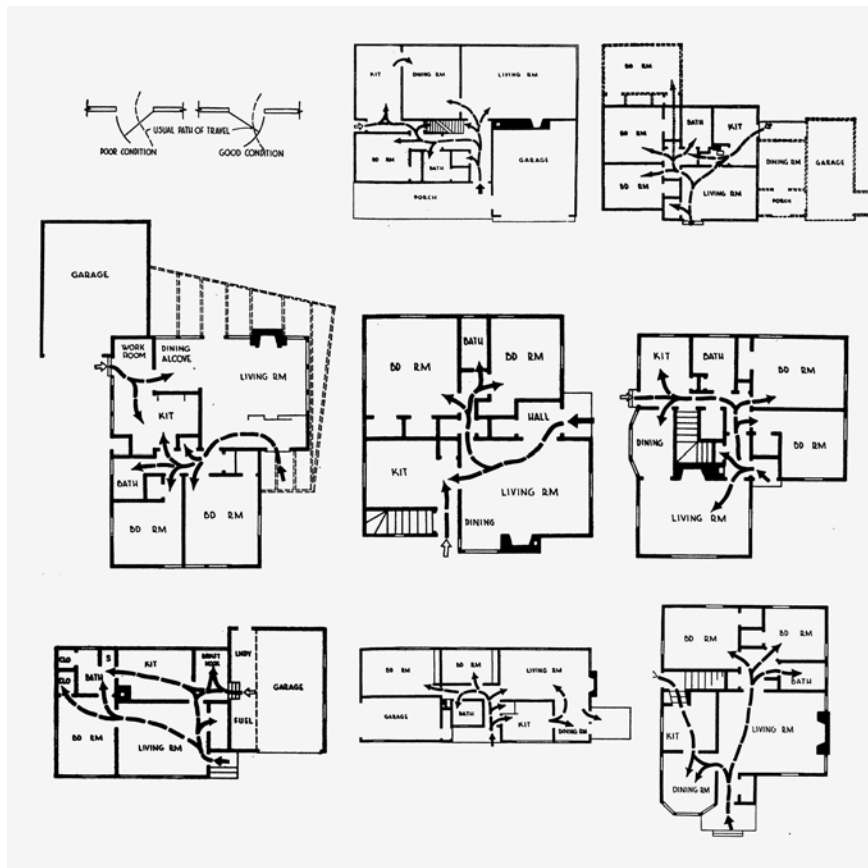
24 Barbara Chu, Interview with the author, July 12, 2012. Philippe Ariès had written books such as, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1960) and was the series editor of the five-volume *History of Private Life* series published by Belknap Press.

25 Benjamin R. Andrew, *Economics of the Household* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), cited in Tessie Agan, *The House, Its Plan and Use* (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1939).



guidelines by architects and planners such as Adolf Loos and Raymond Unwin. Loos, in 1926, said: "When I think of the room in which one sleeps, I must say, above all, that sleeping and living should be kept separate. There must be no mixing between living and sleeping [...]. The bedrooms should never tempt anyone to live there."<sup>26</sup> And in 1936, Unwin said: "Consider for a moment what life in one room for a whole family must be. Consider that there would be deaths, births, marriages, illness, everything going on in one room where all must be. Imagine the mental and moral degradation that must result; the destruction of standards of decency; the bitterness and discontent that would be likely to arise from such conditions."<sup>27</sup>

Chapter eight, "The Razor of Purity," would look at the functional attitudes prevailing in the twentieth century, as various economists, sociologists, and architects attempted to render movement through the house more efficient. The reader will likely be familiar with the way that "Figures, Doors and Passages," ends with Alexander Klein's 1928 text, "The Functional House for Frictionless Living." Evans, however, found numerous similar examples of diagrams mapping the most efficient movement through houses in Tessie Agan, *The House, Its Plan and Use*, or "traffic routes," as Agan called them.<sup>28</sup>



Various plans from Tessie Agan's, *The House, Its Plan and Use* (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1939).

Chapter nine, "The Intercession of Technology," is difficult to infer much about because there is only one enigmatic sentence in Evans's notes, "when the dance of creation is replaced by the march of progress, existence is

26 Adolf Loos, "Stuttgart Lecture," 12 Nov 1926, cited in Ludwig Munz and Gustav Kunstler, *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 165.

27 Raymond Unwin, "Housing and Town Planning Lectures at Columbia. 1936-37, 1938-39," Walter Creese ed., Raymond Unwin, *The Legacy of Raymond Unwin: A Human Pattern for Planning* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 176.

28 Agan, *The House, Its Plan and Use*, 28-36.

sacrificed to knowledge.” The title implies that Evans would have address technology in some way, yet, the only reference would have been to Francis Bacon’s essay, “Of Love,” with the quote: “It is impossible to love and to be the wise.” It is not at all clear what Evans would have addressed here, but it is worth noting the frequency with which he refers to Bacon throughout the notes as a source of wisdom on the value of human contact, love, and friendship. Evans copied down the following passages, for example: “A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swelling of the heart, which passions of all kinds do come and induce;” clarity is found “more by an hour of discourse than by a day’s meditation;” “It is a poor center of a man’s actions, himself;”<sup>29</sup> and finally: “There is in man’s nature a secret inclination and motion towards love of others, which if it be not spent on someone or a few, doth naturally spread itself toward many, and maketh man become human and charitable; as it is seen sometimes in Frears.”<sup>30</sup>

Chapter ten, “The Modern Home in the Wake of Modernity,” would have ended the book by assessing the modern house. It would have discussed, for example, the contemporary problems regarding the construction of new houses in London with yet again more standardized adoptions of house plans with mean spaces. It would have illustrated such mean standards with the example of the then recently published *Preferred Dwelling Plans* by the Greater London Council (GLC).<sup>31</sup> He would have closed the book on a more rousing note, with reference to Friedrich Nietzsche in, *The Gay Science*, saying something to the effect of, what we think we need is “often the effect of what has come to be.”<sup>32</sup> It followed, for Evans, that our modern form of daily life should also be understood as a consequence of history, rather than something we necessarily need or want. Our needs, he wrote, “are shadows cast from the past,”<sup>33</sup> to which he added, “the great effort to make the active spirits in passive bodies has been a success. Spirit, mind, and body have been transformed as well as altered in their relations to one another. Our ‘needs’ define this transformation and fix it in place. Comfort, security, privacy, pleasure, are words with new meanings now.”

Evans’s notes for *The Empty Room* do not necessarily tell us more about the history of domestic architecture than his two more polished published articles from 1978, and the above attempt to reconstruct the image of the book that might have been written is only a very poor image. Yet his notes nonetheless do give us an expanded reading list of references, suggest what his sources were, and who he was in dialogue with. And, above all, the notes indicate a persistent, and perhaps even somewhat repetitive idea, that domestic life could and should be far more carnal, connected, social, and convivial than it felt to him to be in his own day, and that architecture could be a vehicle for that transformation. He imagined large rooms as generous voids that could house all manner of diverse and simultaneous human activities in them—painting, music, reading, playing games, talking, learning, embroidering. He imagined the benefits of people sharing beds with one another. He imagined a domesticity in which people were better off if their own internal thoughts were frequently disturbed and in which one’s comforts were challenged. He imagined that a life lived with friends would ease the passions; that discourse with others leads to more clarity than discourse with oneself; that others are a better reason for one’s actions; and that it is human nature to love others. Moreover, Evans sought to understand, and thus rebuke, the puritanical ideals of previous centuries that treat such human contact as immoral and deviant.

In short, he mused at length in these notes about what he had summarized at the end of, “Figures, Doors and Passages,” as “passion, carnality, and

29 Evans, Notes for The Empty Room.

30 Francis Bacon, *The Essays* (Originally published in 1597), including “Of Friendship,” and “Of Love”

31 GLC *Preferred Dwelling Plans* (London: Architectural Press, 1977).

32 Evans, Notes for The Empty Room. Evans referred to Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974). [Originally published in 1882].

33 Evans, Notes for *The Empty Room*.

sociality.” Evans believed that if architecture had serviced the partitioning of domestic space into segregated and atomized cells, then architecture might be capable of servicing the opening of space again. Contrary to economists, sociologists, and planners, “two or more families in a single house,” might be quite a good thing, and that it might be a good thing for parents and children to share rooms, or for adults of the same sex to share rooms, or that rooms for sleeping and rooms for living be combined. That it might be quite desirable to consider what life in one room for a whole family might be like.

While I have argued elsewhere that it was for largely circumstantial reasons that *The Empty Room* was never completed, here I wish to stress that there was something about both the shifting context of the time and its relation to Evans's commitments to the political ideals contained within the book that led to it being shelved.<sup>34</sup> The argument that he was implicitly advancing in the book had also very much emerged from, and depended on, a specific historical, social, and personal context at the AA in the mid-1970s, in which many faculty and students had dreamed of alternative ways of living. Many of the younger teachers and students at the AA struggled to fit into the middle-class norm of married life and the nuclear family within the single-family home exacerbated by the housing crisis which rendered both renting and buying extremely difficult. At the same time, the GLC had developed an initiative supporting those struggling to find lodgings via cooperative housing arrangements. While many pursued these avenues for financial reasons, many more were touched by the ideals of the counterculture. After seeing examples of the commune movement, these people dreamed of living collectively and communally, not based on economic necessity but rather a principled resistance to capitalism and the nuclear family's role within it. Rejecting marriage and life within the nuclear family by embracing free love and non-monogamy, or even Tolstoian visions of a life outside of property ownership, as well as collective forms of parenting to challenge women's subjugation within a patriarchal system. It was a world in which the dreams of alternatives to the family seemed tangible to many people, where living outside of the logic of bourgeois property ownership and the nuclear family seemed both inspiring and possible.

Yet, this would all change with the social and political revolutions ushered in by Margaret Thatcher after her election in 1979. One of her first initiatives was to shift the balance in the way Britons viewed home ownership by passing the Housing Act of 1980. Chapter 51 of the new act gave tenants of social housing owned by the council the “Right to Buy,” rather than rent, their own home.<sup>35</sup> The result was a dwindling of the social housing stock as homeownership became the new norm. Thatcher's deregulation of financial markets sparked a flood of global capital into London. Properties began being purchased not only by Londoners or Britons but also by international investors and wealthy immigrants, together leading to an exorbitant inflation of house prices in the UK. When Thatcher came to power the price of a house was typically four times that of the country's per capita income. Today, however, that number has grown from four to nine.<sup>36</sup> The rapid inflation of house prices spanning from 1980 to the present has further entrenched homeownership in British life, not merely as a social norm, but as a financial necessity. The dreams of foregoing the ownership of property, living communally, risking freer forms of love relationships, as well as more complicated forms of parenting outside the institution of the nuclear family, have all but vanished as a result.

This larger shift in context only exacerbated Evans's lack of personal conviction about such dreams of communal living and when joined with the dangers of making a functionalist argument which he knew to

34 Joseph Bedford, “In Front of Lives That Leave Nothing Behind,” *AA Files no. 70 (2015): 4-17*.

35 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/51>. Accessed on March 18, 2024.

36 See data from Schroders, <https://www.schroders.com/en/global/individual/insights/what-174-years-of-data-tell-us-about-house-price-affordability-in-the-uk/>. Accessed on January 19, 2024.

be untrue, it made the project impossible and undesirable to finish. The quasi-countercultural atmosphere of the 1970s at the AA had solicited from Evans a more politically utopian project than his maturing scholarly temperament, or inner convictions, could support. Without the vague political frisson that he and Scott offered to their students, that another kind of architecture might draw people together and revivify social life, the historical work that he enjoyed so much no longer seemed necessary.

#### THE IDEAL OF COLLECTIVE LIVING IN THE 1970s

The context at the AA is central to why Evans would have been drawn towards the claim that architectural plans could bring about more collective forms of living. His personal life, however, was central to both understanding why he would have been pushed towards these claims, but also, why he ultimately lacked conviction in them. Evans was not really the type to live in a commune. He never experienced domestic life outside the nuclear family. Partially due to financial reasons, Evans continued living with his family for the majority of his three years at the AA from 1962–66. The only exception being a period during 1965 when he left home for a bedsit in Swiss Cottage with a shared bathroom and cooker located on the landing. He quickly moved home after realizing he did not enjoy such a lifestyle. His wife, Janet, recalls that it was at that moment when he proposed saying, “would you marry me and have my children.”<sup>37</sup> As Janet put it, reflecting on his conviction about having children, “I guess he’d been programmed to think that the family is the family.”<sup>38</sup> He and Janet had been high school sweethearts in the late 1950s at Romford Technical School and for their group of friends, marriage “was the normal thing to do.”<sup>39</sup> As Janet put it: “People that went to Romford County Technical School all got married when they were 21. My photograph album from that year in 1966 is full of photographs of all of my friends and we all got married when we were 21, and it seemed like you had to do that.”<sup>40</sup> They followed all the typical rituals including marrying in a church in 1966 (despite not being religious) and the groom carrying the bride across the threshold when entering their first flat in South London, a very small one-bed studio in an attic.<sup>41</sup>

For four years, they dreamed of more space so that they were not always in each other’s way. “If he was working late and I had to get up the next day, then I would have to go to sleep, and the light was still on. I had to get up in the morning and he was working into the night. That’s why we wanted to get somewhere a bit bigger.”<sup>42</sup> That is, they dreamed of more space and some degree of compartmentalization or separation in their domestic environment that could allow them to simultaneously engage in activities which they viewed as conflicting with one another. They were in an overcrowded situation, and living elbow-to-elbow, due to poverty, not choice.

They tried to save for the mortgage on a house in these years, but the housing crisis at the time made it impossible. London had a shortage of affordable, good-quality accommodation. £12,000 in 1972 (roughly £200,000 today) would have been required to buy them something, but that was ten times Evans’s AA salary of roughly £1440 per year that year (roughly £23,800 per year today). Inflation was high and as Janet put it, “each time you would save your 10 percent deposit, the house prices would

37 Janet Evans, Interview with the author, July 14, 2012.

38 Ibid.

39 Janet Evans, Interview with the author, January 26, 2024.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Janet Evans, Interview with the author, July 14, 2012.

go up another 10 percent, so you couldn't catch up."<sup>43</sup> In 1972, they gave up trying. They got the itch for adventure and spent the money on a road trip around the USA for six weeks, buying a car in Los Angeles and selling it in Boston. Janet wanted to do Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) after that, and they spent most of 1973 in Kenya. They returned to London with no money in January of 1974, to start again from scratch.

They first looked for a flat in North London's Lordship Park and, for a moment, considered taking a flat living with another family. They did not want to live with strangers, so they rented another flat from the same landlords across the street where they had three rooms to themselves arranged as an enfilade on one side of the house from living room to kitchen, to bedroom.. What they did not like, however, was that the bathroom was located off the entrance hallway and had to be shared with their neighbors. They still considered other places and, for a brief period, contemplated a flat in a tower block in Bethnal Green. They were eligible because Janet was teaching in the area. But as Janet put it: "The accommodation in the tower block was so nasty. It was just horrible.... We were paying £14 per week to live down the road [in Lordship Park] and this would have been £10 per week. But it was just not nice. It was cheaper but we still decided that we would not go there because it was not nice."<sup>44</sup> By the Spring of 1974 Evans was settled, but in a situation that he did not find ideal, where the rent was now almost three times higher than their previous flat in South London.

The situation for students in 1974 was no different. Like Evans, students at the AA, and at universities throughout London, did not find the housing situation in 1974 any easier. London was still recovering from the damage caused by the blitz during World War II and there were still numerous derelict properties owned by local councils who were failing to renovate. The difficulty of finding affordable housing caused many students to entertain alternative ideas regarding accommodation, including squats and cooperatives. One young AA student, Julian Feary, lived for a time in a large squat on Castle Road in Kentish Town during the early 1970s. Another student at the AA, Mary-Lou Arscott, was part of a group squatting at Sumner House in Tower Hill. Feary and Arscott will both be important to our story later. Arscott was a student in Unit 11, run by John Turner. Unit 11, at the time, was paired with a "Housing Studies" course from the AA's graduate program, which took on real sites and issues in London regarding the housing shortage. The new program and Unit 11 were run and co-taught by John Turner, Tom Woolley, Hugo Hinsley, Hans Harms, and Colin Ward. Turner ran a "Housing Issues Seminar that year looking at 'owner-builder and rehabilitation, aid self-help, housing associations cooperatives, communes, tenants' management, and squatting."<sup>45</sup> Colin Ward was working on his forthcoming book, *Tenants Take Over*, that called upon council housing tenants to take shared ownership over their properties.<sup>46</sup> Arscott worked with other students, Susan Francis, Angus Brown, Heimir Salt, and Richard Feilden, to draw proposals for how buildings could be refurbished without relocating people.

43 Ibid. Indeed, the price of land rose in England by nearly 200 percent between 1970 and 1973. And this increase, combined with the spike in interest rates from 5 to 13 percent in the first years of the seventies made it difficult for low-income families to save for the deposit on a mortgage. See Colin Ward, *Tenants Take Over* (London: The Architectural Press, 1974), 7

44 Janet Evans, Interview with the author, July 14, 2012.

45 AA Projects Review 1974/75 (London: Architectural Association, 1975), unpaginated.

46 Colin Ward, *Tenants Take Over* (London: The Architectural Press, 1974)



Interior photographs of 12 Tolmers Square in 1975 from Nick Wates with Mae Dewsbery and Caroline Lwin, eds., *Tolmers in Colour: Memories of a London Squatter Community* (Bay Leaf Books, 2010), 24-25. The top left photograph show three of the architects: Nick Wates, Doug Smith, and Barry Shaw. The second from the left on the bottom shows the architect Barry Shaw. The second from the right shows the architect Caroline Lwin and the top right shows the town planner Jamie Gough, brother of Piers Gogh, then a student at the Architectural Association. Photographs courtesy of Nick Wates.

Susan Francis lived in a bus at the time with her then-partner, Eric Parry. Their bus was parked in the parking lot of Chalk Farm Roundhouse which was undeveloped at the time and occupied by a community of homeless people. Squatting was common among AA students, so much so that, on one occasion, the first-year tutors asked all their students to live in a squat for at least one term.<sup>47</sup> Four graduate students at the Bartlett, Nick Wates, Barry Shaw, Doug Smith, and Pedro George began the squat at 12 Tolmers Square and were soon joined by another thirteen architecture students from the Bartlett.<sup>48</sup>



Caroline Lwin working at her drafting table at 12 Tolmers Square London, 1975.  
From *Tolmers in Colour*. Photograph courtesy of Nick Wates.

47 Edward Bottoms, Historian of the Architectural Association, Pers. Comm. January 16, 2024. On the larger history architects squatting in London and its relationship to feminism see Christine Wall, "Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney," *History Workshop Journal* 83, No. 1 (2017): 79-97 and Wates, Nick, and Christian Wolmar, eds. *Squatting: The Real Story* (London: Bay Leaf, 1980)

48 Other architects from the Bartlett who lived at Tolmers Square included Caroline Lwin, Alex Smith, Jamie Gough, Andrew Milburn, Joe Ravetz, Alison Ravetz, Suzy Nelson, Arthur Chesney, Lynne Farrow, Frances Holliss, Paul Nicholson, Danielle Pacaud, and Merve Spragg.

One photograph from 1975 shows Caroline Lwin working at her drafting table in 12 Tolmers Square. Alex Smith recalled the degree of carnality in their living arrangements and their return to “bedfellowship” stating: “There were eight or nine of us sleeping in just one bed.”<sup>49</sup> And Pedro George recounted the communal meals that took place: “The house specialized in producing big communal meals, everyone taking a turn to cook.”<sup>50</sup> Doug Smith described the focus at no. 12 as being on “very social dinners, with the whole house and visitors sitting down together most evenings.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Andrew Milburn, one of the architecture students living at Tolmers: “We saw the developers as ‘evil capitalists’ and relished the opportunity to establish zones of freedom where we could create alternative social structures. [...] I imagined society becoming transformed (via some kind of permanent revolution) into a utopia of creative anarchy.”<sup>52</sup> For Alex Smith it was also political: “[I] decided that the best way to morally oppose Stock Conversion and its property development was to live without money. In fact, my father gave me a £5 note and I used it to light a fire. For food I used to walk to the Covent Garden market with a pram and pick up [the] fruit and vegetables which had been thrown away.”<sup>53</sup> In Smith’s opinion the Tolmers Square community involved a clear rejection of conventional ways of living. The new “extreme form of freedom” he found at Tolmers contrasted both the nuclear family and the privately-owned single-family home. “My previous life was conventional with conventional aims. I was expected to qualify as a respectable architect, have a professional career, have 1.8 children and a good mortgage, be happy and comfortable ever after.”<sup>54</sup>



Tolmer Square Squat, 1975. Photograph from *Tolmers in Colour*.  
Photograph courtesy of Nick Wates.

49 Alex Smith, <https://tolmers.net/stories/rebirth-through-fire/>. Accessed on January 20, 2024.

50 Pedro George, <https://tolmers.net/stories/pedros-story/>. Accessed on January 20, 2024.

51 Doug Smith, <https://tolmers.net/stories/dougs-story/>. Accessed on January 20, 2024.

52 Andrew Milburn, <https://greivity.blogspot.com/2020/06/squatting-under-bridge.html?m=1>. Accessed on January 20, 2024.

53 Alex Smith, <https://tolmers.net/stories/rebirth-through-fire/>. Accessed on January 20, 2024.

54 Ibid.

From 1973 to 1979 the squat grew, hosting as many as seventy people. It became its own village. Tolmers was known as the intellectual center of the squatting community, perhaps because there were so many architects and other professionals involved in urban planning. It was also positioned at the heart of a battle with Stock Conversion, the property development company owned by Joe Levy over the future of this central London site.<sup>55</sup> But it was not alone, and there were many other squats dotted around the area: one in the old dairy shop at 191 North Gower Street; one in 213 North Gower Street; 117 and 119 Drummond Street; one at 58 Euston Street. In addition, there was a related communal house in Great Russell Street. Many of them were occupied by architecture students. In the end, a total of 49 houses in the area were occupied by 180 people.<sup>56</sup> The Tolmers squat was one of many large, high-profile squats in London at the time.

For Pedro Georges, Nick Wates, and the many other architects and planners living there, life at Tolmers was also tied to their commitment to community-oriented planning and criticism of the architectural profession. “It changed my view in my professional sector of architecture and planning,” Pedro George wrote. “Tolmers made me realize that people are important in planning, you have to involve communities in decisions. If you fight a good fight, collectively, people can change their environment (to a certain extent). This revolutionized my way of thinking about the profession of urban planner/designer, which I had by then adopted.”<sup>57</sup> Tolmers remained closely connected to the Bartlett throughout the years, regarded as if it were one of the school’s studios. One photograph even shows the celebrated tutor, Reyner Banham, with his recognizable Stetson hat, standing in front of a “Bucky Dome” outside the residence. Several of those who founded and resided at Tolmers went on to pursue careers in state architects’ departments and taught in architecture schools.<sup>58</sup>



Tolmer Square Squat, 1975. Photograph from *Tolmers in Colour*.  
Photograph courtesy of Nick Wates.

<sup>55</sup> See Nick Wates, *The Battle for Tolmers Square* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976)

<sup>56</sup> See “We all live in Tolmers Square” published on the Bartlett’s website. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/ideas/we-all-live-tolmers-square> Accessed on January 21, 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Pedro George, <https://tolmers.net/stories/pedros-story/> Accessed on January 20, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Barry Shaw and Doug Smith went to work at the Camden County Council Architects Department. Joe Ravetz went on to become Co-Director of the Centre for Urban Resilience & Energy at the Manchester Urban Institute, University of Manchester. Jamie Gough became a lecturer in geography departments in Sydney, Northumbria and Sheffield University. And Suzy Nelson became a professor at Westminster University



Not all collective housing arrangements involved breaking into abandoned property. Another option which captured the imagination of architecture students at the AA and elsewhere in the mid-1970s was cooperative housing. The UK's Housing Act of 1974 supported housing associations by dedicating funds to cover the entire cost of both building and renovating a property. An amendment to the act made it possible for cooperatives to register as housing associations and gain access to these new funds in the form of grants and loans from the Housing Corporation.<sup>59</sup> The grants would be given to a non-profit housing association and could be used to pay for up to 90 percent of the building and renovation costs. However, members of the cooperative would not own the property. Instead, residents were charged a low rent that was used to pay off any debt owed by the cooperative and which covered the shared operating expenses and bills. Their rent effectively became a share in the cooperative, such that, upon leaving, members would receive a lump sum payment. The only requirements for eligibility were to hold weekly meetings, operate like an association, and collectively manage the maintenance of the property.<sup>60</sup>

One successful early example of cooperative housing was the Sanford Housing Co-operative, founded in Southeast London during 1974. It included fourteen communal houses for ten people, ten bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a large kitchen.<sup>61</sup> Its success is evidenced by the fact that it still exists today. Several AA students would take the initiative to form cooperatives with varying degrees of success. For example, Katharine Heron and Leon van Schaik, who both graduated from the AA in 1972, set up a housing association with eight members (despite initially imagining it would have 30), occupying a row of semi-derelict houses they found in the Isle of Dogs.<sup>62</sup> One architect who had lived in Tolmers, Suzi Nelson, went on to work for Solon Cooperative Housing Services, supervising a group of AA students from the more socially radical units of John Turner and Dick Hoben to transform a squat in Shepherdess Walk Islington into a short life cooperative under the new regulations.<sup>63</sup>

In sum, the early 1970s at the AA constituted a very particular social context in which, for various economic and legislative reasons, there was simultaneously a housing crisis and a blossoming of new movements in both squatting and cooperative living arrangements. The more rural countercultural movements of the 1970s found their urban counterpart amongst architects in cities such as London. It was very much a moment. The attention to this topic is illustrated by the end-of-year *AA Projects Review* from 1975 in which there were, by my count, at least forty-five mentions of squatting and housing associations. These included projects in both studios and workshops as well as lectures explaining how housing associations worked and how to form them, a "squatters convention on housing," a "housing association group," and a "housing association study group," which looked at case studies in London such as the Newsome Housing Association, the Solon Housing Association, and Unit 7 which completed a self-build project in collaboration with the Center 33 Housing Association in Tottenham. In 1976, the *AA Project Review* demonstrated how studio masters were responding to both the recent legislation and new "grants to aid housing associations in the temporary rehabilitation of short-life urban property." Tutors were asking students to keep "these grants in mind" and "to make proposals to renovate houses."<sup>64</sup>

It was in this larger context that Robin Evans *almost* became personally involved in a cooperative house. As we have seen, he had tried and failed to buy a house already. He had little money, and his interest was piqued by

59 Johnston Birchall, *The Hidden History of Co-Operative Housing in Britain, Department of Government Working Papers* (London: The University of West London, 1991), 17.

60 Ibid.

61 See the documentary about the Sanford Housing Co-operative <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKBKBBbmups> Accessed on January 21, 2024.

62 Katharine Heron, "Interview with the author," January 19, 2024.

63 Suzy Nelson, Personal correspondence, January 22, 2024.

64 Mark Fisher, "First Year Unit 3," *AA Projects Review 1975/76 (1976): Unpaginated*.

his student, Barbara Chu, with whom he had become close friends as early as 1974. The two met at the AA shortly after Evans returned from Kenya and the USA, where he had been a critic for one of Chu's reviews. Barbara was then in Mike Gold's Unit. In the preceding year, Mike Gold had been part of a larger group of tutors at the AA, including Evans's close friend Fred Scott, as well as Warren Chalk, Paul Sheppard, Ed Jones, and James Gowan, who rejected Alvin Boyarky's new unit diploma system, hanging on to the old team-taught approach to the 5<sup>th</sup> year. However, by 1974/75 they had capitulated and set up their own units, yet remained a close group. James Gowan, who lived at no. 2 Linden Gardens in Nottinghill Gate, had let Fred Scott and Mike Gold know about a dilapidated six-story building at no. 23 Linden Gardens that was available. Mike had formed a housing association with Fred Scott and their respective wives. Mike was also the architect for the famous actress Julie Christie. Christie was, at that moment, breaking up with her partner, Warren Beatty, and thinking about living more communally. In 1973, she relocated to an old three-bedroom farmhouse outside of Montgomery in Wales with a corrugated roof, decaying doors, and no central heating which became a kind of commune where she lived with two friends, Jonathan, and Leslie Heale. Her interest led her to participate in a similar shared housing arrangement in London.

They formed a cooperative of eight people with Gold as the chairman and Scott as the secretary. The group was officially registered with the Housing Corporation as a housing association and secured a loan to buy the house at number 23 Linden Gardens, using some of the funds to convert the basement into a shared kitchen. There were no separate kitchens, and instead, as Gold recalls, "we all lived together for quite a while, eating together, cooking together, drinking together."<sup>65</sup> The shared aspect of the house did not last long as it was always Gold's intention to renovate the property into six private flats. Nevertheless, after numerous conflictual weekly meetings among the cooperative members, Gold wanted an easier life. However, what Gold and Scott were doing during 1974/75 still served as an inspiration to others.

Gold's AA unit that year took two large Victorian Mansions at number 73/75 Linden Gardens as one of the sites for students to work with. They were two back-to-back houses at the end of the row that had been derelict for three years, situated across the street from the house of Gold and Scott. The abandoned mansions had several large rooms and lots of opportunities to develop generous shared spaces. Barbara Chu did a design for the site titled, "Formation of a London Housing Co-operative." As Chu later described: "It was part private spaces for people to live in and part public and shared spaces."<sup>66</sup> That same year, Chu also proposed, "A country House for a Co-operative of 20 people," exploring collective housing at a much larger scale. Chu was in her fourth year at the AA and was dating Julian Feary who, as we have seen, had recently been living in a squat in Kentish Town. The two of them had become very close to Evans, then loosely attached to Unit 4 with Fred Scott. The three began working on a project to form a cooperative group and live together. As Chu recalls: "The genesis of the idea came from various projects in Linden Gardens. [...] The idea was that we wouldn't be all stuck in separate little flats [...]. None of us really wanted to live by ourselves. We wanted to live in a house that had some components that were shared and some components that were private to each couple."<sup>67</sup>

Barbara also knew another couple who needed a place to live and were interested in a cooperative housing arrangement, Lucinda and Brian Hawkins—though for them the motive was primarily financial. Lucinda was an administrator at the AA and the editor of Martin Pawley's, *Ghost Dance Times*. The three couples got together sometime towards the end of 1974 and began looking for an empty house or empty site which they could

65 Mike Gold, "Interview with the author," January 24, 2024.

66 Barbara Chu, "Interview with the author," July 12, 2012.

67 Ibid.

present to a housing association to secure the government-backed loans to cover their construction costs. As Janet Evans recalls: "I liked the idea. It seemed that we were living in this flat in Lordship Park and there was no way out of it. It would have been much nicer to live with other people."<sup>68</sup>

It was largely Chu and Evans who searched for places though whenever they found a site, the whole group would go to see it, discuss the idea together, and draw sketches of how the property might be converted:

We were all interested in the notion of how much space and how many activities were going to be shared and how much would not, and we would talk about that. People would say, "well I don't necessarily want to share a kitchen with people because one of them is messy or because they want to cook different kinds of food, or we don't have the same ideas about when to eat meals." We talked about this a lot. And we went to visit buildings to try and make this happen. We visited different housing associations.<sup>69</sup>

Lucinda recalls looking at properties in Highbury Fields in Islington and Linden Gardens. Janet, Chu, Freary, and Lucinda all recall looking at one particularly "spectacular" place together on the southside of Hemingford Road, just around the corner from where Chu and Feary were then renting. As Feary recalls: "It was a large house on the street with a small area in front. There was a large garden, which had another smaller building in it which had been a workshop, and there was a connection between the two with elegant colored-glass windows."<sup>70</sup>

In the end, their group never found the place they wanted and never managed to persuade a housing association to back them. Evans had become quite "keen on the idea" and "would have liked to have been part of it," as Janet recalls but, in the end, it was not really his thing. He had always wanted a family and their first son was on the way at that moment. The search was taking too long and their priority was to be settled somewhere before their son was born. They were lucky enough to win £1000 on the premium bonds that his father had bought for him when he was born and, together with £100 from each of their parents, they were able to afford a mortgage. Even then, the house was in a redlight district, it needed a lot of work, and they could only make the mortgage payments with a lodger staying on the top floor.

While Evans had pulled out of the project, Chu and Feary continued looking and, together with Mary-Lou Arscott, they found another site at 144 Englefield Road. Ultimately however, that site fell through and Barbara returned to the United States. It was Arscott, along with Susan Francis and their respective partners, who managed to create a more communal housing project, in a more utopian form, for a site that they found in Islington at 97 Shepherdess Walk, where they lived together for twenty years. Arscott recalls that "it was a very deliberate decision" to live in a cooperative housing arrangement because she and Francis were, "completely committed to countering the dominance of patriarchy" and wanted to "diffuse the power relationships of nuclear families."<sup>71</sup> They had also dreamed of rejecting property ownership, having visited the Whiteway Colony when studying at the AA; a nineteenth-century commune founded by members of the Tolstoyan movement in which nobody owned property.

Shepherdess Walk was one of the many streets in London in which property had originally been purchased by the council as part of a larger regeneration scheme but which was then laying derelict as many such schemes had recently fallen through. The local council was in an embarrassing situation as a result as they were obliged to help people

68 Janet Evans, "Interview with the author," July 14, 2012.

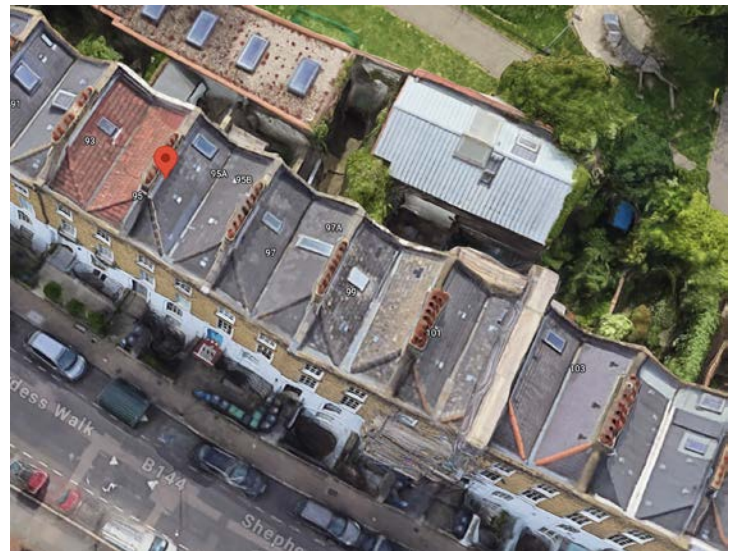
69 Barbara Chu, "Interview with the author," July 12, 2012.

70 Julian Feary, "Interview with the author," January 19, 2024.

71 Mary-Lou Arscott, "Interview with the author," January 17, 2024.

with housing and to address the housing shortage. They thus designated such properties as “short-life” homes, allowing them to be fixed up and occupied until such time as they could develop the area. Arscott had, at that time, met someone campaigning for Shelter who was trying to support the transformation of these derelict houses on Shepherdess Walk into short-life housing cooperative. It was Suzi Nelson, noted earlier for having squatted in Tolmers but was now working for the Solon Cooperative Housing Services, who was responsible for supervising this transformation. Nelson and others had secured a “Mini HAG grant” from the Housing Association of approximately £10,000 in 1984 (£48,000 today) per property to do basic repairs on them such that they could become short term lets. The amount was very low, but as Sunand Prasad recalls, the arrangement for securing the mini-HAG involved the idea that the occupants themselves would put in their own labor to fix up the houses.<sup>72</sup>

The Shepherdess Walk Housing Co-operative (SWHC) was formed in April 1981 and everyone became members, as well as shared owners of the cooperative by investing £1. Members of the SWHC were granted a license by the London Borough of Hackney to live there without every owning the properties, but only on the condition that they agreed to a thirty day notice to vacate the property.<sup>73</sup> Arscott formed a group with Fran Bradshaw, Susan Francis, Sunand Prasad, Barbara Darling, and Michael Bosworth who joined the cooperative and were given the two completely derelict buildings on the wedge-shaped plot of land in the gardens behind the row of terraces. Arscott and Francis had both gone on to train as carpenters for several years after graduating from the AA. They were more than capable of renovating the buildings, which they did using mostly recycled materials. They all moved in during the construction in May 1981.



Left: Upper floor Plan of 97 Shepherdess Walk. Plan Courtesy of Mary-Lou Arscott.  
Right: Google Street View of the two buildings behind 97 Shepherdess Walk that Mary Lou Arscott, John Carson, Susie Francis and Sunand Prasad lived in together for twenty years.  
Image Courtesy of Google Maps.

The building depicted on the left of the plan and screenshot from google maps had originally been a public bath with a street entrance at no. 87, later it became a machining shop, and finally a printing works before becoming derelict. The building on the right was at the time only one story with a concrete roof. They built their kitchen in the old public bath building while the remainder of the

<sup>72</sup> Sunand Prasad, “Interview with the author,” February 13, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

ground floor was used as a shared woodshop with the forty other people in the SWHC, of which their household was one part. As a result, they regularly interacted with everyone as they would have to walk through their kitchen to reach the workshop. Their shared living space was on the ground floor of the second building and the five children slept in the new level they built above.



Mary-Lou Arscott and Susan Francis, one setting out a floor plate at 97 Shepherdess Walk. Photograph courtesy of Mary-Lou Arscott.

The group made the equally radical decision to form a larger extended family, not only living but also raising their children together. Couples Francis and Prasad as well as Darling and Bosworth both had their first children in 1983. The constellation of this extended family changed across the 1980s, however. Fran Bradshaw went to live in another house in SWHC, Darling and Bosworth moved out of SWHC altogether, and John Carson moved in, forming a new couple with Arscott. By 1991 the extended family living at no. 87 was composed of just two couples, Francis and Prasad and Arscott and Carson, along with their five children. The children treated each other as siblings, sharing rooms by age rather than by family. The parents took turns being at home by 4pm to look after the children and prepare the meals which they ate together. They also pooled finances for shared expenses, including food. The larger cooperative in which they lived involved even more complex social dynamics as people moved between the different Shepherdess Walk houses. The cooperative had several different subgroups, one being the “Les Misérables” group who listened to people’s relationship problems and, as Arscott put it, “juggled people around between the houses to reestablish happy households.”<sup>74</sup>

While Evans had bowed out of the search for cooperative or communal housing arrangements, the early example of the first days of what Mike Gold and Fred Scott had created at Linden Gardens and the latter example of what Mary-Lou Arscott and Susan Francis had gone on to create at Shepherdess Walk might serve as images of what could be achieved at this time. They also exemplify the widespread desire that was in the air in these

years to forego the nuclear family and live in shared arrangements; a desire that, as we have seen, was in part sparked by government policy and the availability of loans for such endeavors in the mid-1970s, as well as larger ideals about challenging the nuclear family and living in ways that were perceived as more fulfilling.

Thus, when Evans and Scott got together in the summer of 1975 they focused the polemic of their unit on collective multi-occupancy dwellings for personal reasons. They knew something was in the air and that there was a desire among the student body for such alternate forms of domestic arrangements. As Fred Scott recalls:

We met one sunny day in the top of the building. We could see that we needed a theoretical position, or we knew we would be history. We were edging around this problem and we both said, 'the house' at the same moment [...] We could see that to survive at the AA we had to have a clear position. [...] Our position came out of opposition to the nuclear family, R.D. Laing in particular. There was a whole discussion about the nuclear family, which is now sort of lost, but it was very much alive then. We just thought it would be better for the world in general if we made houses for large numbers of people.<sup>75</sup>



Three of the children from the two families playing together in the kitchen inside the old swimming pool building. Photograph courtesy of Mary-Lou Arscott.

<sup>75</sup> Fred Scott, Interview with the author, July 14, 2012. It was not quite accurate to suggest that Evans was Scott's first attempt to form a Diploma unit. Fred Scott was already aware that his part in the effort to refuse the unit system had been "a disaster" for the group, as he put it, and he had made one attempt the following year in 1974-75 to partner up with Warren Chalk, with the idea that they would focus on theatre design. But a typology in and of itself is not a polemic. Evans was not listed in Diploma Unit 4 in the *AA Prospectus at the start of the year*, but he had joined Unit 4 sometime during through and was listed as unit master by the end of that year. Warren Chalk decided to move to the intermediate school at the end of the year, and after his departure Fred Scott and Robin Evans redefined Diploma Unit 4 as focused on unit around the house as much as a polemic as a typology.

The psychiatrist R.D. Laing had argued that the nuclear family was the source of wide psychological torture and manipulation, as parents gas lit their children by representing their legitimate criticisms about authoritarian styles of parenting as personal neuroses. Laing even argued that the family was responsible for numerous psychological disorders, including schizophrenia. Evans owned the paperback penguin editions of Laing's books such as, *The Divided Self*, and cited his 1972 book, *Knots*, at the end of "Figures, Doors and Passages."<sup>76</sup> Laing was thus a popular public figure in the mid-1970s such that referring to his ideas would have resonated widely among the counterculture. Arguably, the Laing-inspired polemic that Scott and Evans adopted about the house, could be said to have addressed itself well to the sentiments of the student body at the AA at the time, which was most crucial for any successful unit. Even though Chu did not end up living with Evans, she signed up to be part of his unit for the next two years.

The following years, from 1975–77, were crucial for Evans's and Scott's Unit 4 during which they laid out a theoretical argument in pedagogical form. They described, in the AA Projects Review 1975/76 the first project that they set for the students as "seminal." It was a brief in which they asked students to "design a dwelling for twenty to thirty beings on an urban site 46ft x 154ft."<sup>77</sup> Reflecting on the results of the students work at the time, Evans described "a discernible feature common to the work. The universal corridor plan connecting single terminal rooms has been successfully discarded without resort to open planning, by using instead sequences of rooms, receding into privacy, arranged processionally, or providing a variety of routes around the building."<sup>78</sup> He noted that the architecture was "not solely appropriate for nuclear families."<sup>79</sup> During the following year he noted, once again, that "a large part of the work involved enlarged households that no longer fit the nuclear family;" that "Rooms, often quite large rooms, in sequence or forming a connected matrix [had] become the focus of attention;" and that "The fixation about independent access to each and every room is relaxed; sometimes the corridor and the core-stair are completely done away with ...."

The students' projects which were published in the *AA Projects Reviews* in these two years precisely indicate the absence of corridors and single access terminal rooms that Evans described. Most rooms have at least two entrances and many have four, five, six, and even seven. Enfiladed alignments of doorways are common and occasionally strange door types were invented such as four rooms meeting at the corner with either no doors at all or a revolving door between them. Moving between rooms diagonally became a common trope in the studio to avoid doorways altogether or screens of columns to replace walls and doors. Rooms were also often large, and unspecified as to what they would be used for, and to signal this lack of specificity perhaps, every room would, as Scott remarked, have a bed in it.<sup>80</sup>

76 R.D. Laing was most famous *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) but his criticism of the nuclear family was advanced in most clearly in *R.D. Laing, Sanity, Madness and the Family* (London: Penguin Books, 1964) and *R.D. Laing, Knots* (London: Penguin, 1970).

77 Robin Evans and Fred Scott, "Diploma Unit 4," *AA Projects Review 1975-76* (1976): unpaginated.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 As Scott put it, "We looked at the 17th Century engravings in *Mechanization takes command and the conviviality shown in them. We were struck by the fact that every room had a bed in it. So, every room we devised would have a big bed in it.*" Fred Scott, *Interview with the author, July 14, 2012. Scott refers here to Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) [Originally published in 1948].

## THE PROBLEM OF DOMESTIC REALISM

This essay has looked at some of Evans's better-known ideas about the ways in which the architecture of the home functions within a larger historical process of the pacification of daily life. It has situated them in a larger context around the way that architects in London in the mid-1970s, especially around the AA and the people with whom he taught and with whom he was close friends. While the one or two texts that convey these ideas to new generations continue to circulate widely, they do not on their own indicate the larger depth and complexity of the issues he was trying to deal with. If anything, they are admired for their elegant and persuasive prose which functions to motivate a particularly critical argument, in which Evans conveys a belief about what he considers to be most problematic about the modern home and what he desired to change about it.

I have also situated the words of essays such as, "Figures, Doors and Passages," within a larger set of words that he wrote down but that have not circulated as widely, such as his pitch for studios in the AA Prospectus, his description of his studios in the *AA Projects Review*, and then his set of notes for his incomplete book, *The Empty Room* compiled around 1977 and 1978. By doing so I hope to have shown the depth of his normative convictions through the repetition of the same ideas. Yet it is clear from Evans's own life, that he himself was not especially committed to these normative claims and was not ready to live by them. We have seen instead that the value of these claims was that they resonated with a larger interest in the 1970s among many people, including architects, to challenge the nuclear family and the relatively small spaces of the single-family home in which most nuclear families resided. We have also seen that these claims were useful to Evans as someone who was trying to establish himself in his career, both as a successful studio unit master at the AA and more broadly as a theoretical voice within the discipline.

I do not wish to simply suggest that Evans lacked the courage of his convictions or that he was disingenuous. Rather, Evans was ambivalent about the counter cultural hopes of the moment, but at the end of the day, his lack of conviction about such ways of living was not restricted to him alone but would spread to many of those who had been involved in the more radical experiments of the time. Even the more successful radical experiment at Shepherdess Walk, for example, would come to an end by 2000 as their extended family broke into the two couples who now chose to live separately from one another. Furthermore, Arscott's Tolstoyan vision came to an end when the opportunity arose for them to become homeowners there as the council sold the properties to the New Islington & Hackney Housing Association who then gave everyone the option to buy—which everyone took advantage of. Evans was already further along the spectrum towards bourgeois values regarding domestic life, "programmed," as Janet said, since childhood. Soon, however, as the counterculture faded and a general resignation about the lack of alternatives to modern domestic life began to become widespread, everyone would join him.

The cultural theorist, Mark Fisher, spoke with students in his classroom at Goldsmith's College in 2016 about what he called "Domestic Realism," a phrase that for him formed a corollary to what he recently called "Capitalist Realism" in his 2009 book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*<sup>81</sup> Capitalist Realism described, for Fischer, the situation of Western societies in which the collective ability to imagine other futures had become ideologically foreclosed. The idea was summed up in Margaret Thatcher's infamous phrase "There is no alternative." "Domestic Realism," Fisher remarked, "is even more powerful than Capitalist Realism in today's world."<sup>82</sup> Fisher discussed with his students that the idea of the family today is incredibly powerful. Even for those who grew up in broken families. He

81 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

82 Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures* (London: Repeater Books, 2021), 101.



noted that few of his students had ever tried to live collectively or had any experiences of anything other than the nuclear family.<sup>83</sup>

Fisher offered the idea of “Domestic Realism” to his students in the context of them reading Ellen Willis’s text, “The Family: Love It or Leave it.”<sup>84</sup> Willis was a feminist music critic situated at the heart of the counterculture. She had rejected the institution of marriage, the family, and non-monogamy in the sixties but by 1979, when her text was published, had come to argue that: “The new consensus is that the family is our last refuge, our only defense against universal predatory selfishness, loneliness, and rootlessness; the idea that there could be desirable alternatives to the family is no longer taken seriously.”<sup>85</sup> What Willis had rejected the most about the institution of marriage in the sixties was the emphasis upon duty and contract, which she held was incompatible with the freedom of individual passions to love who one wants to love when one wishes to love them. She did not buy into the idea of romantic love in which passion and contract could be yoked together and she thought it diminished the seriousness of passion in human life.

The patriarchal nature of the family, she argued, places the brunt of the domestic work on the mother. However, even if men were to play an equal role in childrearing, she still felt the family, and specifically the nuclear family, render parenthood more burdensome than it need be. “Child rearing is too big a job for one or even two people to handle without an unnatural degree of self-sacrifice, destructive for both generations.”<sup>86</sup> Expressing further what her thoughts had been in the sixties she wrote:

The logical postpatriarchal unit is some version of the commune. Groups of people who agreed to take responsibility for each other, pool their economic resources, and share housework and child care, would have a basis for stability independent of any one couple’s sexual bond; children would have the added security of close ties to adults other than their biological parents (and if the commune were large and flexible enough, parents who had stopped being lovers might choose to remain in it); communal child rearing, shared by both sexes, would remove the element of martyrdom from parenthood.<sup>87</sup>

Yet Fisher’s interest in Willis’s text was precisely because it conveyed the sense that “it was impossible to be unbound from capitalist society” as one of his students put it. For Fisher, it therefore registered a crucial historical transformation at the end of the 1970s and in an exemplary way because of how radical Willis had been. Willis discussed quite honestly the sudden fantasy she had in 1976 to get married. “I have fought, I’ve paid my dues. I’m tired of being a crank, of being marginal. I want in!” she wrote.<sup>88</sup>

The reasons she gave for her change of heart were that she felt less secure with age. She started to reason that the counterculture she had been a part of had only been able to be so radical because everyone was young, from an affluent generation and not especially working class, and could afford to drop out of society, knowing that they could easily drop back in later. She started to see the rejection of the nuclear family as something of a privilege, born of financial means, whereas for many in human history, the family was a place of security and belonging. She longed for the sense of “we,” the shared world, group history, the in-jokes, shared language, and above all, the feeling that she did not have to work to earn her relationships, that they were unconditional. “The difference,” she wrote, “has to do with

83 Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire*, 103.

84 Ellen Willis, “The Family-Love it or Leave it,” in *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope, and Rock-and-Roll* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 149-168.

85 Ellen Willis, “The Family-Love it or Leave it,” 150.

86 *Ibid.*, 157.

87 *Ibid.*, 158.

88 *Ibid.*, 161.

home being the place where when you have to go there they have to take you in—and also being (as the less-quoted next line of the poem has it) something you haven't to deserve. I have friends who would take me in, but on some level I think I have to deserve them.”<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, Willis came to see the family as serving a “genuine need” and especially so for the working classes who could not afford to risk foregoing the minimum securities that the family provided them.

Fisher was ultimately reading Willis to think through with his students the problem of the deeper tenacity of the structures that organize society, that the radical cultural revolutions of the late sixties and early seventies were often too impatient to change. The failure of the hopes of those years was in part the historical naivety involved by many who thought they could change society in a generation. As Fisher said: “People thought it was realistic. This is what Willis is pointing to. It was realistic. We'll get rid of the family and we'll do it now. We'll do it now. We'll start living in communes and that'll be it, that's the end of it. But obviously that was ridiculous. But it didn't seem ridiculous at the time! And that's the value of the text — to bring those two things together.”<sup>90</sup>

One can say therefore, that Evans might have always believed in the nuclear family, and perhaps this was rooted in his working-class background, as someone who, in the end, could not afford to risk foregoing the security that the family provided him. But where Evans was in the mid-1970s when he opted to live with a wife and two children in a small terrace house, was ultimately where everybody else would be by the end of the 1980s. The impatience and naivety of sixties radicalism would not be able to uproot the deeply entrenched structures of modern society. As Arcscott put it, looking back, at least twenty years after *Shepherdess Walk* had come to an end, her idea was that we would be “similar to the Tolstoyan burning of deeds and respecting the principle of occupation and not possession. [...] That is bonkers in this world.”<sup>91</sup> “It was not our intention to own our housing. [...] But King Canute could not hold the tide.”<sup>92</sup> And of that more convivial life, lived with others in the cooperative, she remarked: “oh my god, [I felt] [...] relief moving away and no longer being part of the monthly meetings.”<sup>93</sup>

To Evans's credit, he may have seen this in this way all along. Always the historian, his real interest in the house had been little different from his interests in his first published writings in 1970 on prisons and on the various technologies of modern life that impede or enable our social relations with one another.<sup>94</sup> Evans's picture of the way that society and the things we built and made to furnish our lives was ultimately a deeply historical picture that unfolded over many hundreds of years. He was after all a rare kind of figure in the studio in the mid-1970s, someone who had spent five years completing a doctoral degree in architectural history. And very likely the historical studies; the research conducted in the studio comparing different kinds of homes across time and place; and the buildings from the past that he showed in slides or visited; were what he was most committed to, rather than the somewhat utopian claims implied by his arguments at the time.

“Domestic Realism” as a concept did not, for Fisher, suggest that he was entirely happy with the current historical situation. It was somewhat of a jeremiad intended to shock his audience, to perhaps wake them up from the depths of a paradigm in which they were immersed. His last lecture course in which he coined the term “Domestic Realism” was titled, “Post-Capitalist Desire,” and it took seriously the idea that the current economic system today continues to proceed apace despite all its ills because it is something that

89 Ibid., 161.

90 Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire*, 102-103.

91 Mary-Lou Arcscott, Interview with the Author, January 17, 2024.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Robin Evans, “Anarchitecture,” *Architectural Association Quarterly* (January 1970): 58-70 and Robin Evans, “Panopticon,” *Controspazio* (October 1970): 4-18.

most people, deep down, actually desire. Our very desires and wants are, that is, products of capitalism. Yet Fisher pursued this line of thought not out of a morose sense of self-flagellation, but out of a deep belief that despite the entrenched historical difficulties, many of the criticisms of capitalism and the family still resonate with us, despite everything. The crisis of domestic care within the family persists. The sense of isolation and loneliness for many who do not have a larger world beyond its domain. This is why Fisher read Willis: because the sixties and their cultural forms still “haunt us.”

We have read Evans once again in a similar vein. His story is not one of radicalism. If anything, it is partly a story of his entanglement with a certain impatient naivety of the counterculture, both impersonally and intellectually. And yet for all the naivety of those years, the questions they raised still haunt us. Evans's work of the seventies is worth returning to not only because of the host of difficult issues it raises, but also because Evans recognized the historical complexity of those issues. Just as Fisher had recognized that the problem today is that capitalism has shaped our very desires, Evans recognized that the evolving history of individualism had shaped even his own desires, such that for all his talk about conviviality and sociability, he did not actually want to live collectively. The problem was thus not a problem of simply getting rid of the corridor and going to live in a matrix of connected rooms but a deeper problem about the way that our very desires about how we want to live are, in Evans's words, “shadows cast from the past.”

## AUTHOR

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