

Artist as Medium: Residents of the Beautifullest Place on Earth

The house, like man, can become a skeleton.

Victor Hugo

Museums are tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum.

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Robert Smithson

Never having taken the 422 from North Greenwich to Bexleyheath, I set about scanning the cityscape for reference points, anxious not to miss my stop. Out-of-town retail park. Hospital. Low stone wall. The bus negotiated dips and sharp bends joltingly, catching overhanging branches from tree-lined parks. Past browns and greens, then a suburban high-street: pubs, pharmacy, bookies, charity shops, and a woman asking what stop for the opticians, she'd been getting headaches from the effort of trying to see. I smiled, said I didn't know, I was sorry, and squeezed past her knees to get off opposite the garage.

It used to be pear and apple orchards sweeping down to the Pilgrim's Way. Now there is only a single line of trees and perimeter wall separating the Red House, "the beautifullest place on Earth," from London's sprawl.

Crossing from pavement to stone path, my pace slowed, stilled. An emptied house. I took it in respectfully. Not a museum exactly, but no longer a home. Unhomely. A feeling, a displaced memory: I saw — in the arch of the door, the windows, the eaves — the bones of a house I'd grown up in.

So this is where I begin: with a ghost house, and a haunting.

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Between July and December 2014, artists and writers associated with the Slade, UCL, took up week-long residencies in Kieren Reed's *External Room (1)*, an A-framed structure installed within the grounds of William Morris' Red House in Bexleyheath. This temporary, inside-out space and the activities it housed marked the duration of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*, a collaboration between the Slade and the National Trust initiated by

artists Melanie Jackson and Reed. With its title conjuring the spectre of Edward Burne-Jones on his first visit to the newly-built Red House, the project situated its participant artists in the shadow not only of Morris' home from 1860-65 but also, by extension, of his social, political and creative legacies.

My intention here is to consider the nature and effects of the artists' various engagements with this overarching, if not overwhelming context. These include Michael Duffy's glass paintings in the style of Burne-Jones window designs, Isabell Mallett's text and response to the wall painting within the house and Connie Butler's Nomadic Reading Room, presenting artists' books in the spirit of Morris' own publishing activities. Just like them, this essay is haunted in turn by the Gothic architecture of Red House. Therefore, taking up John Ruskin's 1854 chapter on *The Nature of the Gothic* as reproduced by Morris (1892), I ask: How far do such interventions set the past in forward motion, transporting it into the present? What of their reciprocal impact upon that past? This is one sense in which I am thinking about the artist as medium, that is, as channeling the past lives of the house. The other sense concerns the present-day visitors to and volunteers of Red House, a National Trust property since 2004. Specifically, to what extent did Reed's *External Room (1)* foreground and to what extent conceal its artist residents, and what kinds of relationships were activated in the process? In light of Anthony Vidler's reflections on the architectural uncanny, I bring these two sets of questions together to ask why Red House and its preoccupations should speak to us (as artists, writers, audiences...) now, and what has been communicated with their reanimation as *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*.

Underlying all these questions is the implication of Red House as both architecture and ruins of Morris' social life, politics and practice. To make sense of this notion, I follow Morris in looking to Ruskin, in particular, his revision of the Gothic as a means of countering the effects of industrial modernity. For Ruskin, the division of labour within the factory model of production amounted to modern-day slavery. In essence, he argues that the repetitive manufacture of identical parts denies individual freedom of expression, going on to describe the effects of this process, by which the worker is subordinated to the temporal and classifying regulations of mechanical reproduction, in dystopian terms of the "degradation of the operative into a machine".¹ Therefore staking out his position on ethical grounds, Ruskin not only expresses his distaste for mass-produced commodities and their

¹ Ruskin, J. *The Nature of the Gothic* (Kelmscott Press, 1892): 20

sameness, but moreover condemns all who own them as “slave driver[s]”. In a move which is striking today for the its gendered relations, he holds up the glass beads fashionable amongst women at the time for especial disdain, identifying their uniform perfection as evidence of the soulless nature of the “yoke machine”, by which “men” (sic.) are “broken into small fragments and crumbs of life”.² To reinforce his position, he points to the classical architecture of Greece and Rome as similarly reliant on slave labour for its formal balance and repetition. By turns, the flaws and differences of medieval Gothic architecture are regarded as signs of a “tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought”; that is, as the inevitable consequences of a mode of production that “make[s] a man of the working creature”.³ The imperfection and “changefulness” of the Gothic is therefore presented as honourable to the extent that it betrays the hand and intelligence of the maker as imperfect, and yet as valued by medieval Christian society. So rehearsing the encounter between Romans and Goths, inviting comparison between the vulnerability of the British Empire and that of ancient Rome, Ruskin effectively repositions the Gothic as an aesthetic form of resistance to the alienating effects of industrial capitalism.

The Nature of the Gothic made a lasting impression on the young Morris. Writing in *Commonweal* (1890), some thirty years later, he would echo Ruskin’s sentiments with the strident claim: “So shall we be our own Goths, and at whatever cost break up again the new tyrannous Empire of Capitalism.”⁴ It is with Red House, however, that Morris attempted to realise Ruskin’s architectural and social imaginary. In 1856, he had entered the offices of architect George Edmund Street to learn the principles of Gothic architectural design, training under the supervision of Philip Webb. Street was already established by then as a leading practitioner of the Victorian Gothic Revival, particularly well-regarded for his many ecclesiastical buildings (including, I now realise, the converted, 1857 Church of England school in which I lived as a child).⁵ In fact, the success of Street’s practice throws up a certain contradiction. As historian Nick Groom observes, one effect of the Victorian Revival was to reimagine the Gothic as “communal and traditional, a pre-industrial rural idyll”.⁶ In a century marked in Britain by accelerated development and rural to urban

² Ruskin, *Nature of the Gothic*, 25.

³ *Ibid.* 16.

⁴ Morris, W. “Development of Modern Society” (Part 5), *Commonweal: The Official Organ of the Socialist League*, Vol. 6, No. 240 (16th August, 1890): 260-1.

⁵ See Lobel, M. D. (ed.) *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 8: Lewknor and Pyrton Hundreds* (London: VCH, 1965): 55-80

⁶ Groom, N. *The Gothic* (Oxford: OUP, 2012): 106.

migration, the vision of a pastoral life belonging to a landscape that was rapidly disappearing represented a powerful, shared desire. It is no coincidence that the nineteenth century also witnessed the rise in popularity of both historical reenactment societies and modern Spiritualism, the latter reaching British shores in 1852 when one Mrs. Hayden arrived from the United States to offer her services as a medium.⁷ In the context of these diverse attempts to repossess the past, to defy linear time, it is conspicuous that the demand for more and increasingly elaborate Gothic architecture was only met with industrial advances, in particular, in steel manufacture and brick-making.⁸

Morris, however, had both the means and the determination to forego industrially-produced materials. In 1959, just before his marriage to Jane Burden, he commissioned Webb to design their first home on a plot chosen for its then rural location and, in a nod to Chaucer, its proximity to the Pilgrim's Way. The house was built using hand-made red bricks and clay tiles to an asymmetrical, L-shaped plan that kept open the possibility of future alteration and expansion.⁹ Against the backdrop of a crowded and toiling metropolis, Red House became both the refuge and project for an experiment in communal living and collaborative working. Together, the Morrises, Webb, Burne-Jones and his wife, Georgina, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, and any other guests, took up pre-industrial crafts to decorate and furnish the property, designing and making everything from wallpaper to stained-glass windows, patterned ceilings, frescoes, embroideries and settles. They were guided in their activities by the pursuit of pleasure: a "pleasure in labour" supposedly lost to the machine age, but also a playful and libidinous pleasure in each other's company, with a purpose-built minstrels' gallery setting the scene for medievalist frolicking.¹⁰ Their aim in looking back was to shape the future.

Yet, the suggestion of Red House as a revolutionary project, that is, a material attempt to reverse the industrial degradation of societal relations diagnosed by Ruskin, tends to fall down. Most difficult to reconcile is the fact that, in making space for a "new way to live", Morris was nonetheless dependent upon his social standing and inherited wealth. Whilst this in no way diminishes his criticisms of the capitalist system, nor his commitment to realising an alternate model for nurturing the intelligence and creativity of

⁷ See Trowbridge, J. T. "Early Investigations in Spiritualism", *The North American Review*, Vol. 188, No. 635 (Oct. 1908). 526-538: 526

⁸ Groom, *Gothic*, 106.

⁹ See Red House Lane Conservation Area, *Area Appraisal and Management Plan* (London Borough of Bexley Strategic Planning and Regeneration Department, 2008)

¹⁰ Morris, W. Preface to Ruskin, *Nature of the Gothic*, i.

the worker, it does raise the legitimate question of whether and how such a model might be accessible to those working-class men and women whom it was supposed to emancipate. In turn, one might wonder, did Morris and his friends' medievalist labour and leisure even relate to the experiences of those labouring under a feudal system, whether as serfs or freemen? To put it another way, were the original occupants of Red House reenacting medieval working life, or were they simply reenacting and so reinforcing privileges afforded them in their own present by socially-constructed categories such as class and (given Ruskin's romanticising of British colonial slavery as affording greater freedom than the factory system) ethnoracial identification? A possible answer comes from Groom, who argues that the Gothic has tended to resurface as a manifestation of cultural anxieties arising from change, rather than a radical or critical strategy for motivating change.¹¹ Similarly, in an essay on nostalgia, Anthony Vidler reminds us that to invoke a situation that is "neither here nor there, present or absent, now or then" is unsettling only insofar as it reveals the irreversibility of time.¹²

Further doubt may creep in with the recognition of Red House as an abandoned home to interrupted work. For instance, of twelve embroideries planned by Georgina Burne-Jones for the dining room, seven were realised; a scene sketched out by Morris and Edward Burne-Jones on the panels of the settle in the hall was only partially painted in; a narrative mural intended to extend from the hall, up the stair and into the drawing room walls was never completed.¹³ As it happened, Morris and his young family lived in the house for less than five years. By 1965, the grinding commute from Red House to the commercial premises of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (the Firm) in central London, the gloom of the house in winter and, rumour has it, the jealousies and tensions of communal living prompted Morris to sell up and move with his family back to the city. Even had they remained, it was not long before the city reached Red House. The utopian imaginary was, perhaps unsurprisingly, betrayed by reality. Yet, far from negating Ruskin and Morris' social and spatial politics, the notion of Red House as unfinished project can be thought in terms of the Ruskinian ideal of "changefulness".¹⁴ Being visibly unfinished, Red House speaks to the possibility of political relations as unsettled and unsettling in another sense: that of

¹¹ Groom, *Gothic*, xv.

¹² Vidler, A. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992): 66.

¹³ See Watkinson, R. "Red House Decorated", *JWMS* 7.4 (Spring 1988): 10-15.

¹⁴ Ruskin, *Nature of the Gothic*, 6.

becoming, of being always in process and under negotiation. Seen this way, its incompleteness creates an opening, an invitation of sorts from past occupants to future, unknown collaborators.

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There was a horizontal line of white circles on one of the outside walls, from when it was a school. They'd been painted about waist-high, just the outlines, and worn away in places by the weather. There were three of them, or four, I can't be sure, but they were all the same size and as big as the lampshade that hung above the dining table. I remember we tried to fathom the game, to pretend at being like the children must have been. We took aim with our ball but there was a flower bed so it never bounced back and anyway mum didn't like us playing out front on account of the cars. They always came hurtling around that corner too fast.

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In a text written during her residency as part of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*, Isabel Mallett invokes the spirit of Red House to communicate how the two of them have become entwined:

“As the Red House has become a part of my POETRY/ART/LIFE, so have I, an *artist in residence here*, become a part of the POETRY/ART/LIFE of this place. It is the **NOW** (the life) of this house that makes it such a poignant thing (to speak and be silent with).” (Original emphases.)¹⁵

Taking up where Mallett left off, I shift my attention now to the artists of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* to think about what it means to “become a part of” the unfinished project of Red House. I am particularly curious about the extent to which the artists’ responses reactivated, and to what extent they exposed the limits of Red House as a social and political space. Connected to this, and remembering the second sense of artist as medium, that is, as material of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*, I consider the transformation of Red House from home to National Trust property in terms of audience. Specifically, I

¹⁵ Mallett, I. “ART/POETRY/LIFE”, *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* [online resource] <http://thebeautifullestplaceonearth.com/> [accessed 20th January, 2015]

suggest that the openness of Red House to visitors, which made the artists' residencies possible, also impacts upon the kinds of occupation that can happen there. Whilst the institutional responsibilities of the National Trust to the house itself and to its visitors may limit certain types of activity, they also create opportunities for artists in residence to address and engage multiple audiences over varying timeframes. In thinking about the broader social and political capacities of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*, I want also to remember these relationships as they were mediated and materialised in practice.

Mallett for one expresses a benign disregard for her audience: "When I am working it is not for the benefit of others (sorry) but the only way that I know how to live; a process of building, thinking, dwelling and being that feels natural to me."¹⁶ Elsewhere she is less apologetic about feeling disinclined to meet the expectations of an imagined audience by "add[ing] to the festering pile of desirables that society requires of me as an 'artist'." If for Ruskin imperfection is a desirable effect of the kind of artistic "building, thinking, dwelling" described by Mallett, then she highlights how desirability is itself produced as an effect of market forces. Far from breaking up capitalism, if anything, the Firm anticipated the model for a post-Fordist economy dominated by the ideology of freedom, in which bespoke commodities are produced for the development of and consumption by specialist and high-end markets. The co-option of art and the flexible but precarious working practices of artists within this aestheticised, post-industrial landscape is well-documented.¹⁷ In an effort to resist this tendency towards commodification, Mallett emphasises practice as a "natural" process of becoming rather than a product. Images from her week long residency posted online record a series of impressions: undulating lines scored into cinder blocks, wax casts of the troughs and burrs, red clay moulds with knuckle marks, plaster casts stacked next to a bucket of water stained reddish-brown and a curious fox, a group of objects shaped by a fist clenching at paper pulp. Like her words, Mallett's photographs capture encounters between ideas, bodies, materials and spaces, and the traces and marks they leave behind; the ways in which they impress upon, yield to and resist one another.

Within the context of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*, this practice of encounter inevitably involved other visitors to Red House. Mallett (I) recalls a politely antagonistic exchange with one visitor (V):

¹⁶ Mallett, I. "ART/POETRY/LIFE"

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of this phenomenon, see Sholette, G. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); also, for a groundbreaking critique of public art as implicated in urban gentrification and spatial evictions, see Deutsche, R. *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

V: So what do you do... (*looks at pile of books on table*) ...a lot of reading?

I: Right now I'm writing...

V: Do you make modern art? (*smiling*)

I: Do you mean contemporary art?... What do you mean by that?

V: Produce stuff that no one understands.

I: Produce stuff that no one *wants* to understand."¹⁸

Rehearsing their conversation again here, it seems to me to reveal an underlying tension, something that defines much social and participatory practice but that tends to be smoothed over, which has to do with the struggle to communicate with “others” without one’s own language becoming co-opted and modified beyond recognition. Given the setting, however, their mutual distrust also hints at a further productive tension: between Red House as museum, or “tomb”, where nineteenth century art, craft and architecture is unearthed, restored and conserved; and Red House as living, unfinished, imperfect, and always under negotiation.

With *External Room (1)*, Reed has created a space that represents and accommodates this tension; a timber, canvas and bitumen structure that is, properly speaking, para-architectural. I mean this both in the locational sense of its being *beside* architecture, that is, temporarily sited within the grounds of Red House, circumventing its restrictions, but also as it pertains to the architectural uncanny. When Vidler writes about Bernard Tschumi’s folly for Parc de la Villette as “full of ... paraarchitectural significance”, he is referring to the ways in which Tschumi borrows from and builds on “codes of notation” from across a variety of literary, filmic and musical sources.¹⁹ In particular, Vidler highlights the influence of Russian constructivism in the red colour and stepped and curvilinear forms of Tschumi’s work, but notes that these elements have been fractured and disassembled from their ideological foundations. The effect, he suggests, is of an “object” ambiguously located somewhere between art and architecture; a structure that may be “[e]mpty or full of one activity or another”, but is itself fully expressed.²⁰ Reed’s *External Room (1)* is markedly different from Tschumi’s post-modernist folly, not least in its use of natural construction materials, bodily scale and formal symmetry, although notably

¹⁸ Mallett, “ART/POETRY/LIFE”

¹⁹ Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny*, 107-14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

both of them describe horticultural spaces. Where Tschumi looks to time-based media for his expanded architecture, Reed looks the other way, appropriating architectural forms and construction techniques to realise sculptures with the capacity to express multiple and changing functions over time.

As is suggested by its title, a reference to Morris' original scheme for the walled-garden as an extension of the house, *External Room (1)* operates at the threshold between openness and enclosure. This was the boundary negotiated between artists, volunteers and visitors during each residency and, as the traces of each residency accumulated, between different artistic practices over the duration of *The Beautifullest Place on Earth*. Seen from the outside, glimpsed through trees, its bisecting geometric forms, painted surfaces and tonal contrast read as abstractions of the Red House roof; an integral part of the structure rendered uncanny (*unheimlich*) by its having been grounded. The interior, by contrast, was staged to convey its flexibility. Set-like blocks, planks, trestles and a table-top able to be taken apart and reassembled differently, or stored on exposed overhead beams, window stoppers and props such as paper rolls and woodcuts of the structural plans anticipated any variety of activities; even inactivity.

Traces left by the participating artists in turn hint at a space put to creative use. By the time I entered, two of the windows had been decorated like those of the main house with stylised birds in black and yellow; another was filtered with purplish cellophane; hand-cut neon letters ushered an unlikely zone into "free flow"; a found, broken tile had been placed on a ledge; a strip of white cotton painted in primary colours with a repeating pattern aping Red House's ceilings hung against one wall. If these remnants express the function of a working studio, then others reveal the fluidity of the boundary between artists and visitors this might imply. Images online show *External Room (1)* reconfigured and opened to young participants in a family printing workshop led by Natasha Rees. Meanwhile, texts and printed ephemera produced by artists in residence haunted the main building as part of Connie Butler's *Nomadic Reading Room*, a peripatetic collection of artists' books, writings and prints that changes in response to its location. Reoccupying Morris' former studio, encountered as part of a guided tour (a condition of visitors' entry to Red House), Butler's intervention brought the words of tour guides and resident artists into conversation. Thus, whilst the guide attempted to reconstruct the room as it had been *when* it had been a studio, I found myself distracted by a screen-printed question: "Do you care about historic buildings?" By way of a reflexive answer, *Nomadic Reading Room*, like *External Room (1)*, proposes a different way of honouring the building's history through its reenactment, its reactivation. In this way, far from disregarding Morris' social and political

aims, *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* set up the possibility of a subsequent return — *with* and *besides* Red House— to the scene of creative collaborations but also repressed cultural anxieties.

So, to rephrase my opening question, why should these preoccupations return to us now? What does it do to repeat forms, processes, practices addressed to the problems of a society that has since moved on? In turn, and in view of Reed's sequencing of *External Room (1)*, his invitation (with the woodcut) to copy the plan, how does the implicit *repeatability* of such a collaboration express the future? Taking Freud's image of the mystic writing pad as a starting point for his philosophical analysis of trace, Derrida suggests that repetition opens up the structural possibility of change insofar as repetition necessarily entails difference.²¹ Freud, for his part, connects the "*repetition-compulsion*" to the "return of the repressed" in his formulation of the uncanny.²² As might be expected, he posits that the experience of the double as uncanny points to the return of something from an individual's psychosexual past that has been repressed in infancy. However, perhaps more revealing in this context, he also offers an alternative meaning of the double, which is as representing the return of a utopian imaginary suppressed by the reality principle, through encounters with society.²³ Bringing these ideas together, if the reanimation of Red House as *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* represents the return of the Gothic imaginary, perhaps that is because, in this moment, reality has lost the capacity to suppress it.

I have already gestured toward a shift from industrial to post-industrial economies as connected to the neoliberal reframing of culture as industry and the aestheticisation of capital. Yet this is only a partial account. The industrial manufacturing practices held up for criticism by Ruskin and Morris do in fact continue, just not so much *here*. Instead those of us in the West and Northern hemisphere tend to outsource the exploitative labour required for the mass-production of cheap commodities to industrially-developing nations, principally in the global South. In recent years, the collapse of Rana Plaza clothing factory in Bangladesh; the failure of Apple to address the systemic abuse of assembly-line workers at Pegatron, China; and allegations that Apple's suppliers buy tin ore extracted by children from illegal mines in Indonesia are only a few examples that gesture to the human costs of advanced capitalism. (As I write this on my MacBook Pro, my iPhone plugged in to charge, I am acutely aware of being already too close to this situation.) This uneven

²¹ Derrida, J. *Speech and Phenomena: and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 156.

²² Freud, S. *The Uncanny*

global distribution of labour and rising inequality extends from the crisis of colonial and industrial relations identified by Ruskin and exceeds it, converging with a whole set of crises articulated, via 24-hour news media, in terms of the global financial markets and their imminent collapse, rapid increase in global population and environmental unsustainability. Taken together, these precipitate a further crisis, namely, of *belief* in capitalism's myth of perpetual growth and its corollary, debt; or, as Bifo has suggested, a lapse of faith in the future.²⁴

In this context of accelerating crises, the desire of artists to slow down, to reconnect with ideas, processes and practices from the turning point may well be dismissed as historicist nostalgia; a reflection of cultural anxieties. Then again, the attempt to return Red House to *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* might be imagined differently, in Benjaminian terms, as a "tiger's leap"; a re-mediation of the past for another future.²⁵ I am aware, of course, that such a claim risks romanticising the capacities of the artist, just as Morris romanticised the life and work of the medieval craftsman. Far from reenacting the uneven relations of feudal society, the medievalism of Red House realised a radical social imaginary and political aesthetics based on principles of changefulness, creative freedom and pleasure, albeit built upon existing structures of power. By extending an invitation to artists, offering them, in *External Room (1)*, a space of refuge, openness and flexibility, Reed has conveyed the spirit of Red House, reactivating it as an aesthetic, social and political project. Needless to say, working in this way has involved taking certain risks: the creative risk of ceding control to artist participants, but also, and specific to the context of Red House as a National Trust property, the risk of conflict between willing and potentially unwilling participants. It is this set of relationships —between the National Trust and Slade; artists, volunteers, visitors— that locates *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* so determinately in the present moment. The conversation rehearsed by Mallett gestures toward the tensions at play with the negotiation of Red House as simultaneously historic site and residency space, but this is precisely the point. Rather than smooth over the awkward (and less immediately marketable) aspects of artistic collaboration, *External Room (1)* and *Nomadic Reading Room* variously hold and express relations in tension. In this way, enabling the history of Red House to be performed differently, allowing the resulting differences and contradictions to coexist, *The Beautifullest Place on Earth* resists the

²⁴ Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *After the Future* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011): 17-19

²⁵ Benjamin, W. "On the Concept of History, XIV" in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2006)

tendency of art to become assimilated to reveal a social and political imaginary still, and always under negotiation.

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The uncanny comes from not knowing, Jentsch said. When I was small, I'd learnt every bend and run the winding corridor in the dark (for fear of ghosts), but I tried to look again to make sense of feeling uncomfortable. I went on Google Earth street view, just to compare. It didn't work. The small wall we'd balanced on (too close to cars), where listless teens had sat, flicking their fag ash and drinking tins, has been replaced by an 8-foot fence. Now I can't see a thing.