

UNMANNED AERIAL REALTORS

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A Speculative Fantasy

Once, in the near future, on a rainy island off the northern shores of one of the world's great oceans, a young couple walked into an air-conditioned reception room of a real estate agents office. They were greeted with the same smile that anyone who has ever worked with, or been the customer of, a hard-working real estate agent will immediately recognize. We might imagine they were aspirational, white, early 30s, openly heterosexual, and fearful of the future; though of course they would never show such a fear. They were ushered into a small cinema with a curved screen and translucent headsets with three dimensional capabilities. A nervous moment; these new holographic cinema spaces gave one of our couple migraines on a previous viewing. Through the use of a joystick and deft directorial and piloting skills, the agent remotely activated a swarm of micro-copters, no bigger than a thumbnail each, and gave them a bespoke walking tour of properties; hypothetical homes, funky kitchen cabinets, nurseries and bedrooms of fantastical and practical design. Then the party trick: flying out through the window, around the block, up to the local school and park and back. An augmented overlay of the local neighbourhood displayed school catchment areas, medical facilities, cinemas, cultural and religious demographics, metrics of vibrancy, creativity, flood risk, and air quality in the neighbourhood, and the favoured walking routes and haunts of the current residents. After an hour it was over, the couple shook hands with the agent, thanked and paid them for the service. Perhaps It was never their intention to purchase a home, nor was it the agent's intention to sell them one. The 'homes' themselves could have been a mixture of physical building, stage sets, and graphic enhancement. Who knows? The customers cared not for their liveability, only the 'potentialization of their potential' as desirable spaces. They were paying for the pleasure of the choice-experience.

The speculator's eternal plea: Is it so fanciful to imagine such a future?

On January the 6th, 2015, the Federal Aviation Administration granted its first exemption to a Real Estate company for use of a quadcopter 'to enhance academic community awareness and augment real estate listing videos' (Federal Aviation Administration, 2015). The possibilities for drone use as an avenue for real estate sales had already been explored at the 2013 Real Estate and New Technology (RENT) industry conference held in Paris; Small scale airborne cameras were exhibited as the next big tool for sales, alongside 3D lenses and 360 degree tours (Solihome, 2014). Realtors in the US were excited when the prospect was presented by a former editor of *Wired* magazine at another event: 'you'll carry a small drone in your bag, and when you're taking on a new listing, you can turn on your drone, push a button, and it will orbit the building or home, mapping and creating a 3D model for you' (Christoffer, 2013). Drone technology entering real estate is not surprising: the association of height and dominance within the high-value end of property markets is common; the UAV embodies such vertical aspirations expressed in recent adverts imploring buyers 'to look down on the city that could have swallowed you whole' (Finamore, 2014), or luxury developments in Mumbai that tout 'the same address as god' (Graham and Hewitt, 2014).

But micro-drones also offer the chance to experience properties at a distance, yet from the perspective of the interior spaces the drones pass through. Real estate sales are beginning to make the conceptual move from a flattened vertical space of plans and photographs, to a 'volumetric' view of the everyday - similar to the motions that urban scholars are currently struggling to catch up with (Harris, 2014). In a video from a commercial real estate conference hosted in Las Vegas in 2014, a representative of the company Terosaur, manufacturers of UAVs for domestic commercial use in real estate markets, remarked: 'Now that we have buildings that are smart enough to know what's going on around them, then why can't they know what's going on with the [drone] systems?' (Conference Live, 2014). Such ideas tell us more about the fantasies of the marketplace than about the material possibilities; that the military desire to turn the city inside-out, walk through walls, and peer inside dwelling space (Weizman, 2006), might be fully realized in the civilian arena of sales and marketing. The drone in effect never leaves the premises, gathering (or perhaps just plain fabricating) the data it needs whenever the next prospective client views, keeping the property alert and market-

ready. This is a vision of a world in which the realtor is automated; the vaunted 'internet of things' is able to mediate, augment, and project domestic spaces, and the emotional and cultural desires contained within them, back to prospective customers. But also, like any sensible sales strategy, this would pass by or gloss over potential signs of decay or sources of nausea, isolation, or physical inconvenience that might otherwise detract. Viewing the home remotely in comfort would make for a piece of participatory theatre to be savoured, window shopping; only looking *out* of the window from within.

Reprogramming the Domestic Drone - A Final Speculation

The military drone can work to disguise processes *destroying the home* and causing civilian death; The Forensic Architecture project at Goldsmiths has aimed to counter this obfuscation by reconstructing homes as public evidence from the fragments left by long-range aerial strikes, satellite and online images, and eyewitness testimony (2015). Forensic Architecture repurposes much of the technology of military and mass surveillance towards producing public evidence in support of the rights of the civilian victims of war: Ballistics physics, intelligence reports, studies of the movements of individuals and families, uses of the home and family relations, and military photography and footage of strikes are worked through and examined in granular detail to produce a body of evidence valid in international law.

The role of the domesticated drone in *constructing the home* as an object of desire in sales might find its counter in a forensic movement in the opposite direction, one supporting feminist and queer critiques of the home: The domestic drone is used by realtors to market the home as a space of happiness, complete with a set of emotional ties which, as Sara Ahmed has observed, have been used historically in reproducing a division of labour which is gendered (2010, 52-53). This is to say nothing of the potential for forms of radicalized surveillance and policing of domesticity drones might also facilitate: At the time of writing, the UK government has just announced plans for the removal of the right to rent housing for migrants who have had their applications for asylum rejected by the state, to be enforced through co-operation by landlords and estate agents (Watt, 2015). So far in this story the drone has only been augmenting the existing power relations that inhere in domestic life; how might it be repurposed?

The rise of the domestic drone in real estate reiterates that the popular theoretical turn looking at drones only in terms of their relationship to military sovereignty must be disaggregated. The challenge is to develop an inverse forensic project conducting a disassembly and fragmentation of the home, identifying the seams in the fantasies and fictions of domestic life, and tracing their political history. But building on the forensic approach, it would also repurpose or even reprogram drones and the new infrastructural networks they use for a more utopian speculation: The drone might help make a new kind of home to which no one can take us on a viewing.

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