Polemical models and drawings argue that air travel is becoming more domestic, and domestic space is becoming more globalised; a situation which questions architects' distance and control.

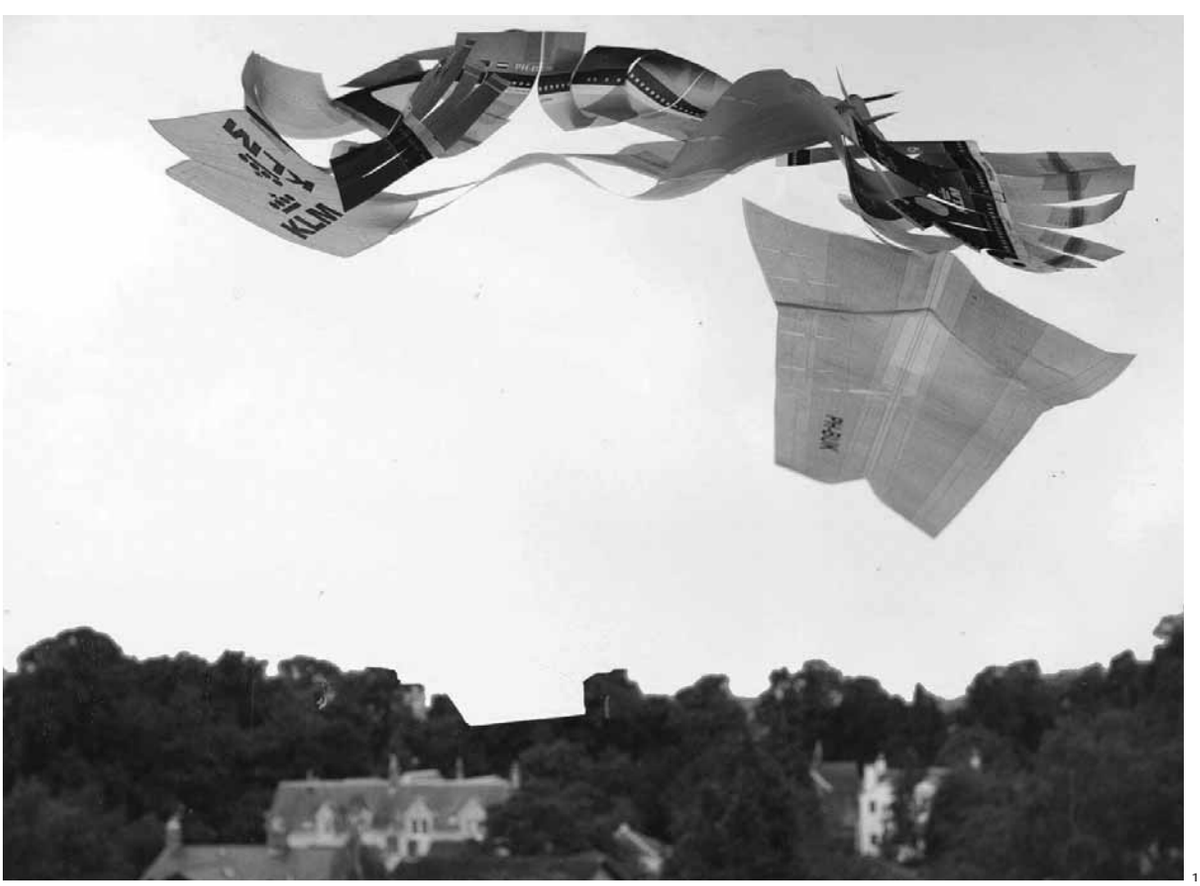
Angels of suburbia

Ben Stringer and Jane McAllister

Suburbia is dependent on a global economy but, in spite of this, suburban domesticity in the UK is still very often framed within images of the 'local' whereas other parts of suburbia, such as business parks and airports, seem to embrace globalisation through sleek, high-tech, 'non-place'[1] aesthetics that seem to eschew the local. The way that these aesthetic differences polarise local and global imagery within suburbia is questionable.

Through a process of making drawings, photos and paper models we have begun to question this opposition and the ideological motives of the corporate culture that maintains it. We have begun to produce sketch paper models and photographic pieces [1–5] in which we merge representations of a Boeing 747 and a contemporary suburban house which, in our minds, symbolise a polarity between the local and the global. By interacting these icons we begin to question this polarity.

Contemporary airliners are like temples to a decontextualised and corporate aesthetic in which a passive faith is nurtured through careful design and the calm voice of cabin crews. Airline culture increasingly cocoons us with a kind of domesticity in its effort to deflect our attention away from the realities of flying. The contemporary suburban house on the other hand is an increasingly 'un-private' site where desires for domesticity and place have to negotiate with a globalised corporate consumer culture that the home absorbs through



1 Paper cut of Boeing 747-300 KLM 'pattern drawings' (scale 1:100), photocopied onto tracing paper, unravelling angelically over suburbia

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new media technologies and changes in the way we consume domestic commodities.[2]

The making of our paper models is an interactive process that begins with architectural line drawings which are subsequently cut and folded by each of us in different ways to produce different three-dimensional entities. Architectural drawings usually aim to offer precise instructions but in this case, because the same drawing produces different models, there is a sense of the architect's control being relinquished in favour of a less predictable, more haptic and more interdisciplinary process. We draw a parallel between this and our hunches about shifts in architectural practice that we think may occur as our globalised consumer culture becomes threatened by potentially severe ecological pressures.

House plane and plane house

We have called two of our small paper sketch models 'house plane' and 'plane house'. To make them we first drew scale plans for fold-up models of a house and a plane. The house is meant to be a generic contemporary suburban type. The plane is a Boeing 747. The next step was to overlay the plans of the house and the plane on top of each other on the same sheet of paper and then to try to fold up either a house or a plane. The result is these models where a 3D model of a suburban house occupies the same space as a paper Boeing 747 *[4, 5]*.

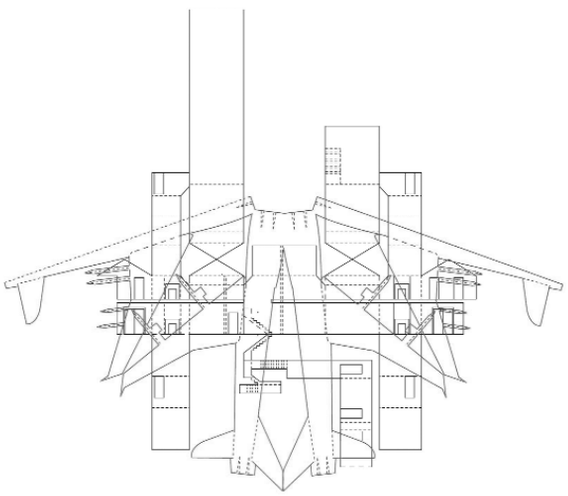
These two models are different because, during the process of construction, one of us prioritised 'house-ness' and the other prioritised 'plane-ness'. The result is that one of the pieces is a house that has almost absorbed the plane except for some wings and other aircraft parts that are left over, while the other ends up as a 747 that has not quite managed to absorb a house and ends up dragging an unaerodynamic undercarriage of living room and garden etc., beneath it. These intuitively made models are uncertain, ambiguous, messy and ephemeral *[4]*. Making these models motivated an interest in reviewing, from a contemporary perspective, a dialectic relationship between air travel and homes that Le Corbusier and other Modernists developed and agitated in the early twentieth century. At that time the experiences of air travel and home appeared far more polarised than today. His comment, in *L'Esprit Nouveau* that an aeroplane '[...] is a little house with wings that can fly and resist the storm' must have seemed very striking at the time.[3]

The inward looking and excessively cosseted private refuge of the bourgeois domestic interior emerged in the nineteenth century, according to Walter Benjamin, as a compensatory reaction to the anxiety created by the modern city, whereas the aeroplane was the very embodiment of an outward looking and heroic modern spirit.[4] Pilots, for example, were celebrated figures in the early twentieth century. Le Corbusier's own exhilaration and his sense of pioneering heroism was clear in his writing about aircraft:

> *'The airplane itself scrutinizes, acts quickly, sees quickly, does not get tired; and more, it gets to the heart of the cruel reality – with its eagle eye it penetrates the misery of towns, and there are photographs for those who have not the courage to go and see things from above for themselves.'*[5]

2 Superimposed 'pattern drawings' of house and plane (scale 1:100), positioned for cutting and folding into 3D models

3 Folded paper models of house and plane (scale 1:100), under construction



2

On the other hand the nostalgic impulse to protect what is disappearing or has already disappeared seems, to us, well illustrated by Benjamin in his following account of the 'Angel of History' from the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

> *'A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one perceives the angel of history. His face is towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.'*

The observation that desires for 'home' increase when a sense of belonging and continuity are being undermined is persuasive when applied to early twentieth-century suburbia in the UK, where a pioneering modernity was often compensated with images of a pastoral past, and – particularly in the design of new houses – with traditional building materials and neo-vernacular details.

Nowadays we imagine a much less polarised relationship between home and aeroplane, because plane travel is no longer so heroic and because homes are no longer so private. Our fascination now

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is with common denominators, and with a kind of corporatisation of space and experience that seems to pervade the cultures of both flight and the home. Airline culture has become very adept at distancing passengers from the exhilaration and danger of flight through its calming and controlling aesthetic. The normalisation of air travel is an example of how our modern life has been made more settled for the middle-class suburbanite than we imagine it was at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Boeing's 747

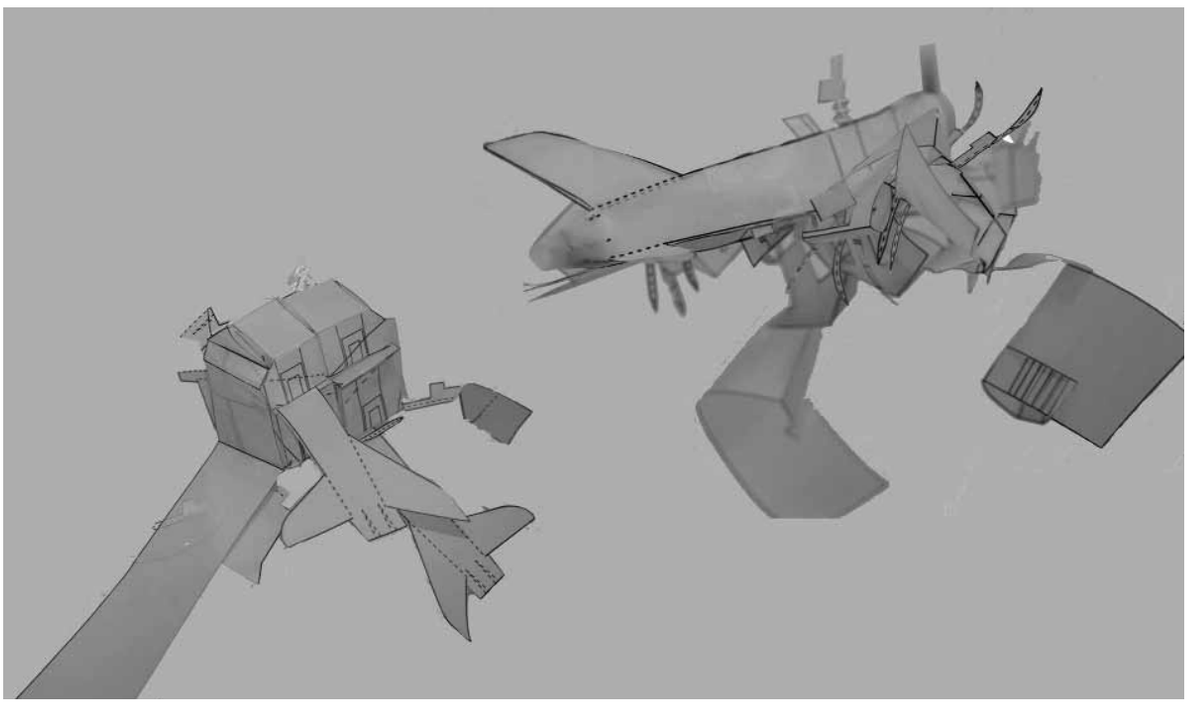
The introduction of the Boeing 747 profoundly changed airline culture and the experience of flight. Thomas Leslie has described the shift in onboard culture that emerged with this new scale of plane and its new kind of passenger. The interior design's emphasis was on 'breaking up the massive space of the 747's cabin and a focus inward toward movie screens and in seat service prepared by large galleys'.[6] Leslie also describes shifts in advertising as the glamour and fashionable sociability of the 707 era was replaced by impressions of passive comfort, for example pictures of individuals dozing in the comfort of their new 747 seats. The new and less experienced economy class passenger was lured not with the experience of flying, but with the experience of something more akin to the interior of a hotel or house. Pan Am advertisements named the economy cabin 'the living room' and described the 747 as 'the hotel on wings' with 'all the room in the world'. The new scale of the 747's economy cabin, usually 10 or more seats wide, meant that people were usually much further away from views of the outside than in any previous jetliner.

The 747 also changed airport design. Leslie has described the formidable architectural and logistical changes that airports such as Pan Am's Kennedy Airport had to make in order to accommodate this new scale of airliner. The stylish elegance of that circular building with its iconic 'parasol' under which 707s could park their noses had to be drastically modified to cope with the much increased flow of passengers from 747s. From this point onwards traffic flow and efficiency took precedence over celebration and fashion. As Leslie puts it, the 'artefacts of this [747] era; cabin interiors, terminal design, and loading structures – all attest to a sense of insulation from the sensations of flight and an anaesthetising of our awareness of motion, translation and position within the grids of airports and airspace'.[7] The phrase 'non-place' is commonly used to describe this kind of space, and it is no coincidence that a Winogrand photo of an airport interior with alone and tired travellers adorns the cover of Marc Augé's book *Non-Places* – the book which is often credited with popularising this phrase that seems to polarise the local from the global. The designers of the 747, it could be said, are also among the authors of 'non-place'.

The house, the local and the global

From our point of view, there are affinities between the controlled 'cocooning' of suburban domestic space and airline space in the 747 era.[8] For suburbia, spatial control and a feeling of safety are supported by 'picturesque', 'homely' iconographies as well as by the standardisation or conformism of building techniques. Similarly airports around the world have, since the 747, tended toward an architectural and programmatic homogeneity whose repeated spatial control has provided a familiar and secure datum

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and haven from which to gauge 'other' cultures and protect against 'otherness' generally. In planes too one perceives a continuing 'domestication' of flight. No hostesses anymore, but flight attendants who sometimes wear aprons, attendants who are mostly women, whereas the pilots are still nearly always men who are out of sight on the flight deck doing the 'manly' job of flying the plane.

At the same time that travel space undergoes these important shifts, the home is becoming increasingly 'un-private', as Terence Riley puts it. Our domestic space is transformed by processes such as new media technologies, a continuing dispersal of the family, and the increased disposability of 'de-contextualising' branded goods in the home. On the latter subject, Richard Sennett says that the idea of the home as a personal museum in which objects were accumulated has dissipated in the 'new capitalism' wherein 'abandonment fits into the process of finding new stimulations – the objects particularly easy to give up since they are basically standardised goods'.

The increasing lack of 'privacy' in the contemporary middle-class home and the domestication of flight diminishes their respective polarity in our minds and, for us, signifies a kind of corporatisation of space. Yet, in spite of this narrowing of the space between house and plane, the visual polarity between the neo-vernacular home and the high-tech airport remains strong. Commercial house builders still, in the main, sell romantic images of the local, through such things as neo-vernacular architectural styling and watercolour renderings in their advertising, which contrasts vividly with the high-tech styling that is more or less universal for airports around the world. In effect, the combination visually promotes the idea that the 'global' and the 'local' are distinct realms.

In her book *For Space*, Doreen Massey dismantles the theoretical and ideological misconceptions of this persistent 'Russian Doll' like assumption, wherein the world is perceived as a series of decreasing scales that do not really relate to each other. She argues for example, that battles to protect the local as a response to globalisation often miss the point, which is that:

> *'The political meaning of "local" cannot be determined outside of specific contextual reference. Local/global in itself cannot be an adequate surface along which to constitute political antagonism. The political questions become not whether globalisation, but what kinds of interrelations are to construct an alternative globalisation, and thus not simply a defence of place-as-is, but the political project of the places within it.'*[9]

Viewed from a geographical perspective, our models' entanglement of an icon of globalisation and a typical suburban house with its superficially designed 'local' aesthetic might thus equate to enmeshing the 'global' with the 'local', and opening to a more creative uncertainty and complexity than the local/global division allows for.

Creative reprogramming of suburban space

But the subject of our pieces is not only the ambiguous merging of a 747 and a house that we have discussed, it is also the architect's drawing and, somehow, a critique of the ways in which that architecture is communicated. To us, the subjects of suburbia and air travel and the making process of these pieces are related.

There is a scenario that has been running through our heads recently which has evolved in recent months, in part through the work of some of our Masters students and which we were talking about when we began making these pieces, which runs as follows. Cheap air travel is threatened by taxation, rising fuel costs and disapproval of its damaging ecological effects. This becomes part of a cultural

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4 In-flight folded paper models of winged house-plane and unaerodynamic plane-house

5 Folded paper models of winged house-plane and plane-house absorbing projections of the city from below

shift which invigorates the local: socially, culturally, economically and politically. It does this because it becomes less viable economically and ethically to fly goods and people long distances. This has consequences for suburban consumer culture, because of the way that its consumption is structured around global and national brands that are delivered through shopping malls and hypermarkets, the internet and so on. Thus, in this scenario, suburbia will change the most because it has the closest socio-spatial relationship with a globalised consumer culture. The emphasis on the local manifests itself in many ways: more people working from home or near home, resulting in live/leisure/work boundaries becoming blurred; and more local goods and services being consumed and thus invigorating local economic networks which in turn make local social networks more important. Suburbia thus moves further from its Taylorised, fragmented, global-consumerist oriented socio-spatial logic, to one where boundaries are transgressed more frequently and where the role of space becomes hybridised more often.

Within this scenario the suburban house is increasingly used as a place of work, for the provision of services and for the small-scale production of goods. Houses thus are not only family homes, but offices, shops and workshops too. The desire for the iconic and singular image of the detached period style family house diminishes in favour of more flexible and diverse aesthetics as the role of the home is hybridised. The production and consumption patterns of suburbs diversify and become more idiosyncratic and they become less uniform and more experimental in the ways that they use space. Suburbs become less divided programmatically; they become more variegated and may even become interesting for tourists.

Along with the house's hybridising use patterns comes a presumption that because of environmental pressures, conservative suburban signs – such as fake nostalgic house styles for example – will increasingly give way to architecture which is more practical and sustainable, but at the same time more playful, culturally diverse and idiosyncratic. In this scenario, the image of the architect alters as suburbia becomes less desiring of its traditional symbols and more oriented toward creatively re-programming suburban space. Crucially, the image of the architect as a part of a *milieu* – as an enabler with a more finely tuned sense of what a practitioner like Nabeel Hamdi might call the 'intelligence' of the city[10] – might be complemented by a much more active and creative user than the passive consumer that the developer-led building industry is oriented towards today.

In another context, Luce Irigaray described angels rather differently to Benjamin's protective Angelus Novus:

> *'Manifest in the realm of time and space there are angels. These messengers who never remain enclosed in a place, who are never immobile* [...] *angels would circulate as mediators of that which has not yet happened, of what is still going to happen, of what is on the horizon. Endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universes, identities, the unfolding actions, of history.*
>
> *'The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition* [...].'[11]

It may be that the angel's ability to transgress divisions will serve as a better *modus operandi* in the suburbia that we have imagined than the impulse to

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preserve what has already gone. The house plane pieces seem to us to occupy a similar mindset as they move from a two-dimensional representation to tactile papery forms, as they try to merge the two seemingly disparate figures of the house on the ground and the plane in the sky.

Distance and control

While contemplating the view from a plane over Rio de Janeiro, Le Corbusier claims he had a revelation that was, in his view, to alter the course of urban planning. He wrote: 'In the plane I had my sketchbook [and] as everything became clear I sketched [...] the ideas of modern planning'.[12] Thus Le Corbusier portrays himself as the author of modern planning and prioritises the author over the city. Unable to see clearly within the complexity of the city, he distances himself from it at the same time as gaining power over it.

From our point of view, our drawings and models allude to a collapsing of the distance that Le Corbusier sought from the city and the control he desired over it. These pieces are ambiguous, and can be cut and folded in different ways because the drawing omits textual and notational instructions. In this way, the drawing is relinquishing some of the architect's control and is asking for a measure of creativity on the part of the drawings user.

These are drawings which call attention to their own materiality. Through cutting and folding they allude to a more haptic kind of architectural practice in which the drawings are given shape by their users. They interfere with the normal reading of an architectural drawing by becoming construction sites themselves and not simply instructions to build or imagine something else. Architects' drawings are usually oriented to a kind of passivity and obedience on the part of the drawings user. Here, the intention is that the combination of a house and plane and the folding of a drawing by its user into something undecided in advance might express a sense of a creative enmeshing of the views 'from above' and, as De Certeau puts it, 'from below the threshold at which visibility begins'.

Notes

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Biographies

Jane McAllister studied architecture at the Architectural Association London, Cooper Union New York and the Bartlett UCL. She has practised as an architect, currently teaches at London Metropolitan University and is also a faculty member of The Research Centre for Experimental Practice (EXP).

Ben Stringer studied Architecture at the Polytechnic of Central London and the Bartlett UCL. He worked in a variety of architectural practices before taking up an academic career. He currently teaches at the University of Westminster and is a faculty member of The Research Centre for Experimental Practice (EXP).

Authors' addresses
Jane McAllister
160 Leighton Road
London
NW5 2RE
UK
Jane_mca@hotmail.com

Ben Stringer
120 Southfield Road
Oxford
OX4 1PA
UK
b.stringer@westminster.ac.uk

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