

## **The Big Brother House is Watching You**

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**Abstract:** The transitory celebrities who compete in Big Brother occupy the arena of their competition agog and open mouthed, for while Big Brother is, apparently, about the contestants, the real star of the reality show is the House in which it takes place.

The Big Brother House is a place of mirrors concealing hidden eyes, disembodied voices and multiple voyeurs. Rather than granted refuge in this house, its occupants are exposed in a crazy cottage where Orwell meets vaudeville; and prison cells or luxuriant dens appear overnight installed by mischievous pixies. The BB House is the antithesis of Bachelard's vertically ordered Oneiric Axis of nightmarish cellar, formal, domestic 'middle kingdom', and the dream space of the attic. The Big Brother house is horizontally layered but fabricated, (to build and to lie).

The Big Brother House is a model in extremis of what contemporary domestic interior has become. Like a Foucaulvian heterotopia it is an hermetic, apparently complete model of occupancy. Indeed there is no exterior to this house, which is both closed-off and opened-up through live digital streaming, RSS feeds, and text updates. As such the BB House reveals surrealist tendencies: the mirrors are evocative of Magritte; the windows are for the voyeur not external vista; the BB occupants and the TV viewers are passive idle loafers.

In this respect, the Big Brother House reflects the spectacular model homes that have adorned expos from the Great to the Ideal Home exhibitions, from Peter and Alison Smithson's House of the Future (1956) to Archigram's 1990 Automated House (1967). Like these other models, the BB House is not a 'real' home, but is as abstracted as a white card maquette

But the Big Brother House possesses something that these other simulations lack: occupants who are at the same time real and imagined: The Big Brother House is not a fantasy, but an experiment, as empirically valid as any the most Orwellian of rational modernists could desire. Because the design of the house (and the show itself) is iterative and repeated, learning with each iteration from the experiences of the last, it is a continuing experiment in the negotiation between occupancy and constructed space of the most radical kind.

This paper explores the emergence and the development of the many Big Brother Houses of the last decade, and the ways in which they have been occupied, in order to discuss issues that affect more general perceptions of the contemporary interior.

**Keywords:** occupancy, transience, control, virtuality, representation

## Introduction

### **In which Winston Smith writes a diary, and George Orwell makes an inadvertent prophecy.**

The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live -- did live, from habit that became instinct -- in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized....

For some reason the telescreen in the living-room was in an unusual position. Instead of being placed, as was normal, in the end wall, where it could command the whole room, it was in the longer wall, opposite the window. To one side of it there was a shallow alcove in which Winston was now sitting, and which, when the flats were built, had probably been intended to hold bookshelves. By sitting in the alcove, and keeping well back, Winston was able to remain outside the range of the telescreen, so far as sight went. He could be heard, of course, but so long as he stayed in his present position he could not be seen. It was partly the unusual geography of the room that had suggested to him the thing that he was now about to do. <sup>1</sup>

What Winston Smith was about to do was to keep a diary: to write down his private thoughts in a space that had once been used for keeping books, which are themselves the repositories of private thoughts. In this apparently innocent act, Winston Smith set in motion his own destruction, and the plot of George Orwell's novel '1984'.

'1984' was, as Anthony Burgess pointed out in his '1985', a satire on the postwar world of 1948 rather than a prophecy; but in 1999, the home subjected to the all-seeing gaze of television became a reality. Fifty one years after it was written, the Dutch television production company Endemol launched a 'reality' TV game show in the UK that took its cue from Orwell's novel. Big Brother was named for the Supreme Leader whose implacable eye watched everyone in the dystopian world of '1984'.

There have been nine iterations of Big Brother since 1999 (excluding the celebrity, teen, and other versions of the show); and what was so absurd as to be dystopian satire in 1948, and mad novelty in 1999 is now as much part of the British sporting summer as Wimbledon. It is the argument of this paper that, in the same period, it is not only the show that has entered the public consciousness, but also the house in which it is set. By a strange quirk of televisual fate, Winston Smith's flat, conjured in a couple of paragraphs in a novel, has become a model for the design of the contemporary home.

This paper will explore the typology of the Big Brother House through the wondering eyes of the first contestant to arrive. It will then examine how the house conditions the behavior of its occupants. Next, it will reflect upon the relationship between the house and the television viewing public who consume the show; and finally it will propose the Big Brother house as a

meaningful area for interior design research that embraces aspects of popular culture, interaction, ethnography and digital technologies; in this instance, the paper will speculate on the recent collaborations in the Equator Project and Curious Homes. Finally, the Big Brother House is considered as a viable model of the home of the future.

### **In which we lay our scene**

#### **The Typology of the Big Brother House**

It's the same every year, more or less. It's May or June in the far eastern reaches of suburban London. The limousine halts in the middle of what appears to be an uncontrolled mob, a security guard opens the door, and a star – or at least a celebrity – is born.

The celebrity-to-be ascends a steel gantry that exposes them against a large wall of crinkly tin, reminiscent of nothing so much as some vast warehouse shed in an industrial lot. At the end of the gantry is the door that will grant admittance into the place of their transformation.

And then they're in. The door slides open, the celebrity enters and the door slides shut again. The roar of the crowd suddenly falls silent; and the first housemate in Big Brother finds him or herself in a brave new world, with as yet, no-one in it. Then they begin to explore their new world.

The heart of the Big Brother House is a large room which accommodates all the daily functions of living: there is a open plan kitchen, generously equipped with all the most up to date appliances, a dining area, and a seating area, in which the new celebrity may loll on furniture of the most fashionable design. The living space is closely connected to a communal bedroom and bathroom. Both open onto an enclosed garden which contains a small pool, and, usually a gazebo of some kind: a caravan, a treehouse, a wigwam, a giant ashtray: counterpart, as such buildings always are the more practical spaces of the house proper.

The first person to enter the Big Brother house wanders round in astonishment, for it's like a museum of contemporary design. In BB1, back in 1999, the house reflected the minimalist tastes of a nation still half in love with the novelty of IKEA and modern design. The BB3 house of 2001, constructed entirely from renewable timber (and partly thatched) stated the sustainable credentials of the show. The BB7 house played surrealist games of inside-outside, with the dining table and the shower situated in the garden, and the interior furnished with deckchairs; and the BB8 house did the same the interior, placing the bath right in the middle of the living area. The BB9 house of 2008 was an homage to low-rent, high budget kitsch. Every year, Big Brother publishes a suppliers list, so that viewers can get the look of the house they will be watching for thirteen weeks. Designers compete fiercely for their work to be featured on the show: it's a sign of critical acceptance, of a sort, and of course, superb product placement.

But if there's a model for this sort of house, it is not a modern one: it's certainly not the terrace, the semi, or the detached villas that dominate the housing stock of modern Britain. There are no shadows to praise, as Tanasaki<sup>2</sup> might, and nor is the house structured along the vertical oneiric axis between cellar and attic described by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it is a restatement of the houses of Pompeii, or the *hôtels particuliers* of Ancien Regime Paris: a congeries of internal spaces, more or less regularly connected to one another along a horizontal plane. These buildings, like the Big Brother House, are introverted:

they present no façade to the outside world. In this sense the Big Brother house recalls Foucault's notion of heterotopias, <sup>4</sup> which, separated from the outside world, seeks to reproduce it.

This internal world bears no evident relationship with the exterior of the building. In between these two worlds there is a zone of invisible servant spaces of extent unknown, a place of sound studios, control rooms, rat runs and service ducts; and in this sense the big brother house also recalls the *hôtel particulier*, in which salon is separated from boudoir by zones of *poché*: the habitation of maidservants and footmen who appear as if by magic, at the pull of a bell cord.

The door opens, and the next contestant walks in, and the spell is broken. The scene is set.

### **The Game Begins**

#### **The Big Brother House as a dramatic set**

There's one room in the house that may be entered only with permission. The Diary Room is inhabited by a seat. It started out as a simple chair once upon a time; but over the years it has turned into a throne: in BB3 It grew ears, and turned gold, in BB8 it became a luminous Perspex throne; and by BB9 it became a bloated Raymond Loewy-styled divan. While Winston Smith hid himself away to write his diary, this throne room is where the housemates go to record their most intimate thoughts – on national television. It is among the rules of the game that no housemate may possess paper or writing implements. Denied any repository for their private thoughts, housemates are compelled to share them with Big Brother, and through him, the viewing public.

The Diary Room is the hinge between the internal spaces of the house proper and the building in which it is embedded; but these zone of *poché* play far from a traditional, servant role. Big Brother issues instructions, and the housemates, sequestered in his house, are duty bound to obey them.

As the show proceeds other spaces open up from within the *poché*, and, usually, they are secret places of transgression and magic. In BB7, Aisleyne is transported to a secret house, where she dwells with an entirely new set of housemates. In BB5 Michelle and Emma leave the house, expecting to re-enter the outside world, but find themselves confined in a bedsit instead. Sequestered there, they watch their old housemates on television; and confronted and armed with a few home truths, they return to the main house, wreaking a terrible revenge. In BB3, Cameron, who enters one such space, finds himself transported all the way to another Big Brother house – in South Africa. In the 2007 Celebrity Big Brother, Chantelle and Preston kindle the flames of their romance in a luxury den whose existence they are forbidden to reveal to their housemates.

These spaces drive the narrative of the show, providing architectural *dei ex machina* which are designed to provoke or frustrate the desires of the housemates. Most obviously provocative among these interventions is the 'great divide' which has been used to sow discord among housemates. In Big Brother 3 the house was divided by a wall of prison bars that separated one side of the house: the rich side, from the poor. It happened again in BB9, where a thin Perspex barrier separated heaven – with its luxury bedroom and bathroom, from a hell where contestants slept under scratchy woolen blankets and supped on prison food

slop. In heaven lolled Pyramus Rex, and on the other his sulking Thisbe Nicole, their romance sustained only by stolen kisses through chinks in the wall.

The success of such social manipulations – and of the various and wonderful ways in which love has triumphed over them - have led to all sorts of experiments with the design of the Big Brother house. The BB4 house was deliberately designed to be as cramped as possible, in order to provoke conflict among its inhabitants, while that of BB6 was designed as the 'evil' house, in which mirrors reminded the housemates at every turn that they had nowhere to hide.

Indeed, house after house has been designed to expose the most intimate activities to the all seeing gaze of Big Brother. In BB8, the bath was placed in the living room. In the BB7, the kitchen and the shower were situated in the garden. In BB9 housemates were provided with one less bed than they needed, to ensure that beds would have to be shared, with predictable results. Germaine Greer, who walked out of the celebrity version of the show in 2007 wrote:

*WHENEVER technicians come onto the set, which is quite often, the housemates are "locked down"...During lockdown the bathroom and lavatory are.. locked, in case housemates should come face to face with a technician. As two of the female housemates seemed to have a urinary problem, barring access to the lavatory resulted in real and completely unentertaining suffering which might go on for hours. It would have served Big Brother right if housemates had wet their beds and daubed the walls with shit.*<sup>5</sup>

The Big Brother house, then, is anything but a passive vessel. It is an active participant in the show, whose purpose is to stretch out the timeframe of occupation through a self-enforced segregation, to sow faction, engender love, and provoke ritual humiliation to elicit viewing figures; in other words, to drive the plot, contrive narratives and manipulate occupants in a manner that meets the voyeuristic appetite of the audience.

Its antecedents reflect social realism in British TV in the sixties that attempted to *show us as ourselves to ourselves*. The social realism docu/drama format blurred the boundary between classic drama and rigorous journalistic documentary, and in many ways, the BB House blurs the distinction further between soap, game show, documentary and drama. Like the aural presence of Big Brother, the film crew within these socially realistic *fly-on-the-wall* docu/drama were equally disembodied. A seminal example of this mass tele-visual occupation was the twelve part series, *The Family* (BBC, 1974), which is credited with creating the concept of the 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. *The Family* follows the mundane ordinariness of familial occupation of Terry and Margaret Wilkins, their children and their partners, as they all struggle to live together in a small flat in Reading.<sup>6</sup> Filmed for eighteen hours a day for three months, the family, (like many Big Brother contestants), were vilified by the tabloid press for their imagined social transgressions: their 'acting' for the camera, and their 'real' behaviour in front of it, their use of bad language and public airing of previously taboo subjects such as racism.

Whilst the house of strangers that occupy the BB House are the antithesis of this familial drama, both reveal the consequences of a forced, televised, and exposed form of occupation. Its antecedent is not so much the visionary promises embodied in the ideal(ised) homes of the future - so often a feature of past and present building trade shows, but rather a deviant and enforced occupation that simulates a laboratory experience that explored what happened

when you put good people in an evil place. The Stanford prison experiment in 1971, in which mock confinement within the basement of Stanford University's Psychology department exposed how the illusion, (of a mock prison), became the reality and the boundaries between the roles individuals enacted and the real person was erased.

The analogy of occupied space, (e.g. mock prison, actual home, or reality tv set), as a 'lab' reflects recent research into design interactions and interventions within the domestic sphere. In his 'Equator Project' for the RCA, Bill Gaver used smart digital weight technologies to map patterns of occupation in the home. These patterns were observed through the lens, (metaphorically and objectively), of a series of alien products that resembled everyday objects, such as a coffee table, key table, framed artwork or table cloth. Intrusion and intervention, in these contexts, were used as subtle and revealing research processes that offer a counterpoint to the brash expose of the BB House format. The Equator Project used these products to explore broad issues of mediated social behavior between occupants and the alien artefacts that occupy the home of willing participants, (not contestants). The objects designed by Gaver and his colleagues at RCA were products that were not 'pre-packed' with meaning, but instead allowed the occupants to invest their own interpretation and meaning in response to use. This is in stark contrast to the visible, but passive role the designer objects, (props) play within the BB House and the subsequent web wish-lists that persuade viewers to buy into the celebrity culture that epitomises Big Brother.

The Equator Project was a six-year interdisciplinary research collaboration funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), to investigate the integration of the physical and digital worlds by developing innovative systems. The manner in which the BB House experience infiltrates both our physical and digital lives is clear: it occupies both facets. The initial research involved design driven research techniques called *Cultural Probes* that invited occupants to respond to series of simple experiments designed to uncover ones values, activities, rituals, behaviours and patterns of occupation. Various smart interactive technologies were integrated into a series of 'familiar' products; a *drift table*; a *key table* and *history table cloth*. In these three examples, each uses weight and force sensors to create designs with subtle interactive sensitivities. The Drift Table has a window / oculus in the centre displaying slowly moving satellite images of England from the comfort of your living room; the Key Table - positioned at the door to a home, is a device that indicates the mood of people in a house through the way in which they slam keys, or delicately place their belongings on it, and the History Tablecloth emulates a lace textile, and illuminates around objects that are placed on it, mapping both the time and patterns of domestic use. Each occupant was invited to discover each product's purpose through a ludic and playful interaction, in what Gaver describes as transferring through products and those who interact with them, a sequence of interesting displays, what he describes as Curious Homes for Curious People.

### **The viewers watch the show**

#### **The Big Brother House as inverted spectacle**

It is ironic, then, that Big Brother is classified as reality TV. Indeed, the design of the house is largely driven by the fact that it is not a house at all, but a television set, broadcast for an hour a day on Channel 4 and live for 24 hours a day on E4. The designer of the BB4 house,

Patrick Watson comments:

*One of the reasons the house looks so big are the cameras – positioned in high corners, they're bound to give the impression of more space than the housemates feel when they're sat in the middle of the room.<sup>7</sup>*

The courts and gardens and chambers of the big brother house are minutely controlled environments, designed entirely for televisual consumption. The windows and mirrors of the house are apertures not out of the house, but into it, for they are the hiding place of the hundreds of cameras that record every move the housemates make. Only the lavatory is immune, providing, like Winston Smith's alcove, a shelter from the relentless gaze not only of Big Brother, but of the viewing public. Ziggy and Chanelle sought it out regularly in BB8 as a place for a romantic tryst.

The BB House is a home on a show, a show-home, and as such it shares a lineage with other visionary architectural creations such as Alison and Peter Smithson's *'House of the Future'* (1956); Archigram's 1990 Automated House (1967) shown at Harrods, and Rayner Banham's experimental 'Un-House' of 1967 and others. Like these other architectural visions the BB House is not a 'real' home, but unlike the House of the Future, which was inhabited by models in futuristic white makeup, it possesses real occupants: seen and unseen.

The *'House of the Future'* reflected a growing consumerism and acknowledged the promise of the chemical, atomic and the jet industries. The Smithson's considered their entire house as an appliance, often embedding light fittings, replacing concrete, glass and steel with wipe clean plastic, and rectilinear architectural lines with the free flowing forms of product design. An obsession with all things modern and instant even applied to a rejection of the 'institution' of a full English breakfast, which was replaced by instant mash. The Smithson's explored an 'anti-monumental' aesthetic that embraced impermanence and disposable architecture.

The Home of the Future shared with Rayner Banham's 'Unhouse' the idea of a centrally stacked services core, (which in Big Brother, is an off-site television production unit somewhere on the periphery of the BB House rather than in the 'core'), which we recognise as HVAC services rather than surveillance technology associated with Big Brother. Both, like Bachelard and Heidegger's sentimental writings, touched raw nerves about identity and belonging; Heidegger's attraction to the Black Forest, and Banham's Jeffersonian desire to connect with the great prairies and plains. The Un-House was stripped bare, (a metaphor not lost on the Big Brother occupants), and effectively dematerialised, and at its heart were essential HVAC mechanical services; a transparent and highly visible inflatable bubble with its central core with music and giant format data projector screen. Banham discussed the imbalance between the fabric of the home / house and the technology required to operate it that suggests links with Big Brothers technological infrastructure:

*'.....when it [the home] contains so many services [technology] that the hardware could stand up by itself without any assistance from the house, why have a house to hold it up.....what is the house doing except concealing your mechanical pudenda? <sup>8</sup>*

But Banham imagined the Un-house as the passive recipient of services from hot air to piped Dionne Warwick. The Big Brother House, on the other hand, like Winston Smith's flat in 1884, transmits as well as receives. Like the Smithson's 'Home of the Future' is is a satire of the present and a vision of what is to come, held up for consideration in the public arena. Every

week the viewing public, whose own homes are as wired into the global media system as a Remer Banham could have ever desired them to be, vote on which of the housemates will stay and which will be evicted from the house.

Or that's what they seem to be voting about. They are really voting on the latest design feature of the show home to come to their attention, for it is the house, not its inhabitants, which are the spectacle.

## The Finale

### The Big Brother House as Design Research

Its more or less the same every year. The winner of Big Brother waits alone in the lounge for Davina. Denuded of inhabitants, the house itself seems strangely shabby: it has been tested almost to destruction. It won't last long: some survive for the celebrity version of the show in January, but the majority are broken up, and the furnishings are sold on. They have already gone out of fashion, after three months or more of overexposure. The production team will already be thinking about the next house, assessing what worked, or didn't about the House. These observations will be used to make an even better version next time.

The Big Brother House – a sham stage set, a show home, and an outrageous social experiment - can help the design community to explore such ethically sensitive issues of privacy – especially when our own privacy is invaded at home, and our urban spaces are among the most intensively monitored zones in the world. In 'Is Privacy Dead in the Digital Age', Professor Anne Anderson reminds us of a counter culture to the typical surveillance society; that of sousveillance. Surveillance implies a top-down and controlling approach where police, state, or indeed Big Brother producers monitor individuals. Sousveillance is a counter culture term that describes a 'bottom-up' surveillance, where we begin to observe the observers; or police the police or, as in the case of the recent riots in Burma, use everyday mobile phone technologies to expose tyranny and oppression of a state over its people (Anderson 2009). This inversion disrupts the powerbases of those who normally seek to control and direct those being observed, (Anderson, 2009). This also suggests an anxiety and insecurity at home. Despite the growth of digital and security technologies, we seem to be increasingly insecure in our alarmed homes, (Smith & Topham, 2002).

*A paradox of the contemporary "private" interior is that in certain situations [post 9/11] it's design forces the behavioural expectations of others on to us.....subjugates the individuals will to that of the group.....paving the way for domestic designs that imprison "free" inhabitants in alarmed paradises...<sup>9</sup>*

Our increasing unease of the CCTV networks that occupy UK high streets and our anxiety over the surveillance society we now live within where you are likely to have your own image taken, on average in the UK, approximately 300 times per day, and there are 4.2 million CCTV cameras in the UK at a cost of £500 million (Anderson 2009). As the CEO of Sun Microsystems said recently, "Privacy is dead; Get used to it", but rather than a designed experience that places people at the centre of technology, this is a designed experience that places people as willing accomplices at the mercy of technology and the media frenzy.

Aristotle disliked the sanctity and privacy of *home and hearth*. He saw the private domain as dull in comparison to the dynamism of public space. Big Brother would agree with him: it began as a tale of (un)heroic resistance: Winston Smith tried to keep a diary to record his private thoughts; and ended up in room 101, facing his most private nightmares at the hands of the state. The housemates of Big Brother are voluntary citizens of the dystopian 'Oceania'



of Orwell's novel, and we, who watch their every move in our supposedly private homes, are their accomplices.

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### Endnotes

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**BB4**

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**BB5**

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**BB6**

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