

BETH WILLIAMS, WITH JAN SMITHERAM

## The Keeper of My Memories

INTERSTICES 24

Storytelling in architecture can foster a world rich in possibilities.<sup>1</sup> For architect Perry Kulper, storytelling is used as a critical design tool that allows us to challenge “default assumptions” offering a reframing of what is taken for granted.<sup>2</sup> Equally, architect Andrew Bernheimer, in *Fairy Tale Architecture*, suggests that fairy tale narratives offer architecture a way to move beyond retelling the story of people, the past or place, but rather to speculate.<sup>3</sup> For Bernheimer, fairy tales provide the built environment with “stories that traffic in magic, [and] require a suspension of disbelief.”<sup>4</sup> The exploration of architecture through the lens of fantasy and narrative offers the potential to construct imaginary worlds through space and time and to construct a “compelling promise of a magical home.”<sup>5</sup> *The Keeper of My Memories* presents a flight into the fantastical through the everyday domestic.

*The Keeper of My Memories* occupies the intersection between architecture and storytelling and questions, what if childhood daydreaming can bridge the real and the imaginary, sparking moments of reverie and nostalgia.<sup>6</sup> Using an autoethnographic approach that draws on my childhood daydreams, this practice-based research stages moments, memorialises the past and the future, to create an architectural fantasy out of fragmentary worlds. Existing in three acts that scale in complexity, this imaginary fabrication shifts from an installation to a house and finally a mise-en-scène.

Act I explores the miniature as a tool to transport viewers to an imagined place. It follows the Model-maker as they construct *The Dream House*. Act II follows the story of seven characters: the Boatbuilder, the Dressmaker, the Lepidopterist, the Gardener, the Stargazer, the Model-maker, and the Writer. Act III builds on the dreams of Act II, where the house becomes a mise-en-scène and we are welcomed to the inner workings of *The Keeper of My Memories*. These are the lives I have wanted to lead, woven into a story, sited in my birthplace, 8–10 Lime Road, Bristol, England. This house is never presented as a static piece of architecture but always evolving with its inhabitants.

## Act I: The doll's house

Act I commences with the doll's house. As historian Catriona McAra suggests in "Dollhouse architecture," the doll's house is used as a figure in art to make evident "traditionally marginal spaces" and to bring them "to the centre of critical attention."<sup>7</sup> Here, the doll's house is used as a motif to reclaim a space traditionally associated with women, as both a feminist design principle and as a reference to the imaginings of my childhood. I started to develop a storyline around a little girl who sits in her bedroom creating a world from her imagination. The research then developed around an extended narrative of imagined characters, where visual media became a way to generate reveries through possible worlds.

*The Model-maker sits in their workshop, stringing together intricate creations and imagining those who might occupy the world inside.*

*The little boy with his grandfather.*

*The woman watching her son on his first day of school.*

*Each one carefully glued into place.*

*Each one with their own story.*

As the imagined world is constructed, the fairy tale begins. The Model-maker builds *The Dream House* with two different façades (Fig. 1 and 2). One side is restrained in its ornamentation, whilst in contrast, the other is covered in ivy and decoration. It is here our story begins, where

*The Dream House protects the dreamer, and here we shall dream. Watch the world inside, transfixed by the stories one can conjure.*

Viewers are encouraged to engage with *The Dream House* through levers engraved with "pull me" and controlled viewports, which alter the interior scene.

Fig. 1 Beth Williams (2023).  
*The Dream House* [Photograph]



*The Dream House* orientates the viewer towards an endlessly reflected vista created through opposing mirrors, where glimpses of their own reflection are seen in an estranged world full of imagination and wonder. Rich hues in pink, green, orange, and yellow animate *The Dream House* and the stories of the Model-maker. Colours, shapes, and materials cue questions about the nature of home and architecture's often chromophobic formal propositions.

*Welcome to the reverie. The space between our reality and the imagined.*

*I am not the storyteller.*

*You are.*

Fig. 2 Beth Williams (2023).  
*The Dream House* [Photograph]



Fig. 3 Beth Williams (2023).  
Form finding [Painting]



## Act II: A spatial fairy tale

Act II bridges real and imagined realms to spark moments of reverie. My questions and stories drive the narrative, a “what-if” to the lives I could have led. I question what if I were a marine biologist, a fairy, an astronaut, a set designer or an author? And what if I were an architect? The house design explores these questions through seven fictional characters. The initial explorations in Act II used painting as a method to create organic forms, which were translated into physical models and developed digitally into the architecture of the house at Lime Road (Fig. 3).

The tales of the Boatbuilder and the Dressmaker, the Lepidopterist, the Gardener, the Stargazer, the Model-maker, and the Writer are told over 172 years. The story gathers the past and projects the future, evolving and responding to the occupants who reside in its form. Colours are used as a character foil for each of the house’s inhabitants. It is the objects of the home that are central to the storyline, running water in the bathtub or the activities in the kitchen become “departure points” for “sophisticated imaginings.”<sup>8</sup> This is a design that rebels against typical architectural documentation, instead encouraging the imagination through un-fixed imagery and accompanying narrative (Fig. 4–8). The story begins.

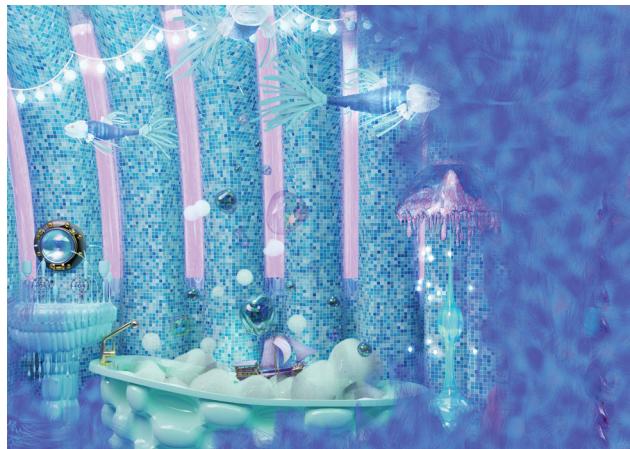
### The Boatbuilder and the Dressmaker

Our story starts in 1851, when a baby boy in Number 8 Lime Road and a baby girl in Number 10 are born, on the same night, on the same street, moments apart.





Fig. 4 and 5 Beth Williams (2023).  
[Digital collage]



The boy is called the Boatbuilder and the girl, the Dressmaker. In 1876, they are engaged to be married and inherit the neighbouring houses at 8 and 10 Lime Road. Later, there is a fire that destroys both homes, and the two buildings vanish into a pile of smoke. The double plot of land becomes the blank canvas for their dreams (Fig. 4 and 5).

### **The Lepidopterist and the Gardener**

The child of the Boatbuilder and the Dressmaker is the Lepidopterist. She becomes the new custodian of 8–10 Lime Road after her parents pass. The house becomes a symphony of colour, with intricate brushstrokes of butterflies, moths, and vibrant flowers. The Lepidopterist meets the Gardener, and they share their home as a haven for those in need. It is through these actions that they meet our next protagonist (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Beth Williams (2023)  
[Digital collage]





Fig. 7 Beth Williams (2023)  
[Digital collage]



### The Stargazer

The Stargazer lives with the Lepidopterist and the Gardener for many years. She infuses Lime Road with celestial motifs, and stars dance on the walls. She becomes a surrogate daughter to the couple, looking after them in their old age, before selling the house to another family in 1971 (Fig. 7).

### The Model-maker

A little girl's tale unfolds in Bristol. Her world is captivated by the miniature, where tiny spaces hold boundless potential for magic and wonder. She becomes the Model-maker, envisioning stories and animating worlds. Here, she conjures dreams of dolls' houses and dream houses. (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 Beth Williams (2023)  
[Digital collage]



## The Writer

In 2023, 8–10 Lime Road comes up for sale, capturing the heart of the Writer. She falls in love with the house. The Writer starts a family at Lime Road where she laughs, cries, and grieves in her dream home. This is the house's story (Fig. 9).

Act II becomes the focal point of the story. It is a project which emerges into existence constituted between (and with) the past and present, real and imagined. Inspired by daydreams, the house is explored as an extension of the fictional inhabitants, becoming its own evolving character. The spectacle that emerges is both ordinary and extraordinary, simultaneously private and public, and is a house that encourages viewers to project their own stories into the space.

Fig. 9 Beth Williams (2023)  
[Digital collage]







Fig. 10 Beth Williams (2023)  
[Digital collage]

### Act III: Public scale

Act III begins to bridge the real and the imagined, and is revealed as a mise-en-scène, built from fragments of Lime Road. The lives of its inhabitants unfold through a collage of spaces, and places.

*Look closely at the world presented. What can you see? The cast and crew? The slides and ladders? The department gondolas? The rooms of 8–10 Lime Road?*

*The house and its characters are actors revealed in this mise-en-scène.*

*Welcome to the inner workings of Lime Road.*



The narrative unfolds through the design of a gondola for each of the five departments:

**Directorial and Script Department:** The writer and director travel in a hanging gondola across the film sets.

**Hair and Makeup Department:** The Hair and Makeup gondola calls in at the Costume Department to pick up the cast for the next scene.

**Lighting Department:** Next along the gondola's pathway is the Lighting Department, allowing for multiple sets to be lit from a singular position.

**Costume Department:** The Costume Department is adorned with hanging garments and fabrics, ready to be fabricated into flooring panels or clothing for the cast.

**Effects Department:** Next on the gondola journey is the Effects Department, which adjusts the imagery.

Act III shows Lime Road as a fragmented collection of visual tricks, painted backdrops, and miniature models.<sup>9</sup> This visual playground connected through moving gondolas links the people, the house, and my daydreams (Fig. 10).

*No longer a backdrop, the architecture now plays an integral role in the story, forever developing the tale of Lime Road.*

*This is a story for the dreamers.*

### Concluding comments

*The Keeper of My Memories* dares to consider the possibility that the imaginary worlds we have conjured and created over our lives are no longer lost childhood daydreams. The project explores the promise of a magical house and questions whether this daydreaming could be harnessed through architectural narrative, bridging the imaginary and real, providing hope for the dreamers.

## NOTES

1. C. J. Lim and Ed Liu, *Short Stories: London in Two-and-a-Half Dimensions* (Routledge, 2009).
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3. Andrew Bernheimer, "Drawing Stories: An Introduction," in *Fairy Tale Architecture*, ed. Andrew Bernheimer and Kate Bernheimer (ORO Editions, 2020), 8–9.
4. Bernheimer, "Drawing Stories: An Introduction," 9.
5. Kate Bernheimer and Andrew Bernheimer, "Fairy Tale Architecture: The Library of Babel," *Places Journal* (December 2013), <https://placesjournal.org/article/fairy-tale-architecture-the-library-of-babel/>.
6. C. J. Lim, "London Short Stories: Drawing Narratives," *Architectural Design* 83, no. 5 (2013): 102–107 (104), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.1641>.
7. Catriona McAra, "Dollhouse Architecture: Leonora Carrington and Children's Literature," *Gramarye: The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy* 12 (2017): 35–45 (42).
8. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (The MIT Press, 2013), 92.
9. Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 3.