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On the Frontline: Domestic Sovereigns, Wealth and Public Space

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Something profound has happened to the look of the domestic dwellings of the middle and higher income groups in our towns and cities and our built environment appears to index deep-seated fears of intrusion and invasion, as much as it does the display of rising real wealth.

Taking a drive through the urban fringe of Manchester I was struck by how many large homes sported automatic gates and video entry systems, the majority of homes in some areas. My immediate thoughts were, why would anyone feel the need for such security measures living here? The rise of [gated communities and the individually defensible home](#) in the UK - a built environment - which many might have thought would be restricted to high-crime societies of the US, Latin America and South Africa - says much about social life today.

To see these processes in extremis one might amble past Harrods on Brompton Road and up to [One Hyde Park](#), an imposing apartment block that overlooks the intersection with Kensington Road. The development is remarkable for its world-beating real estate prices but also for its attention to security. Its homes are defended not simply by burglar alarms or strong locks but by SAS-trained security guards with earpieces who prevent the hoi polloi getting a close-up of its opulent residences.

Its occupants are, like characters in a J G Ballard novel, protected from disaster scenarios dreamt-up by pessimistic (or perhaps prescient) architects who have decided to include bomb-proof glass in its slatted windows (bullet-proofing apparently not being good enough) which are also designed to prevent residents observing each other. These are the finishing touches to a development that has set new standards in visual and security aesthetics found in luxury residences that are sold on a global housing market.

One Hyde Park is emblematic of the kind of visible changes to the built environment where rising personal wealth has been used to develop increasingly defended homes. But why have these changes occurred? It is worth for a moment reflecting on the related rise of gated communities in whose rise two key forces are commonly identified. On the one hand is a self-evident fear of crime but, secondly there is the way in which gates and evident seclusion offer a sense of prestige via a check on unwanted intrusion or risky outsiders.

Yet underneath this widely observed process of the 'forting-up' of entire neighbourhoods has been the much less noticed but perhaps more significant practice of fortifying the domestic home. Many middle-income and wealthy areas now contain private homes that utilise powerful technologies, to repel potential invaders, reminiscent of Deyan Sudjic's idea, in his *The Edifice Complex: The Architecture of Power*, (2011), of an edifice complex in which dictators and the powerful have sought to extend their personal reputations and power through their homes and public building projects.

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Recent reports that Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg has [bought the four homes around him](#) highlight, albeit in a more extreme form, the desire for privacy and safety that goes with the territory of extreme affluence and fame. Similarly the castle on a rock in the English Channel owned by the reclusive Barclay Brothers, Enya's Irish castellated home or the ambition of J K Rowling to construct a more than ten foot high wall around her Edinburgh home are some of the many examples of the contemporary transformation of the domestic home into a space that speaks of fear, protection and the unwanted nature of social contact. Such homes are perhaps the very model of living being considered by those with the resources to do so.

A walk around many of the areas now colonised by the super-rich in central London also shows that a felt need to protect oneself, one's family and one's assets is a paramount concern. What this yields in many spaces is a kind of urban life that is very different from what has gone before – entire streets with (sometimes armed) guards, security staff for individual homes on patrol as well as a wider aesthetic of control and fear that is indicated by the presence of wall spikes, infrared CCTV cameras and guard dogs have become increasingly visible. The signage accompanying these changes appears implicitly to identify the casual walker-by as a potential danger to those inside with warnings about CCTV recording, signs not to loiter, not to enter private streets (private in the sense that they are not maintained by the local authority) or being observed with suspicion by servants or security personnel. Whereas gated communities can be identified in the history of London's medieval architecture and private roads what we now see is a more emphatically paranoid landscape that speaks of the fears of the affluent while also changing the look and feel of urban social life today.

Some sociologists see this landscape as the result of a creeping implementation of a more militarised, withdrawn and secure architecture that goes beyond the basic need for safety. Others see it as an unfortunate dividend of wealth when placed amidst the social and economic insecurity that marks the social lives of others. Far from happiness, security and liberation it would appear that wealth is producing a generation of house-bound and chaperoned householders and their children among the extremely wealthy. Life appears to become a strategic engagement with a hostile environment containing potential burglars, hostage-takers and even assassins (the uncertainty over the Berezovsky death offering an indication of the apparent plausibility of such possibilities).

Outside the glitz and edifices of the super-rich, domestic life has more broadly appeared to take on this defensive character as security systems have been democratised by their declining cost. The fortification of domestic life is not only for the rich, the famous and the paranoid. Of course, few would wish to have a home that was vulnerable to invasion and the evidence on burglary shows that [dramatic reductions](#) in such crimes have been achieved by adding basic security features like burglar alarms, locking windows and good door locks. This can be highlighted by visiting those areas where burglary is most prevalent which tend to comprise much poorer households who lack the resource to invest in such security. Yet what is interesting about the take-up of domestic security is that this is heavily connected to

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our housing tenure (i.e. owning or some form of renting). In other words an important blend of social, economic and legal forces need to be evaluated in trying to understand how and why domestic security has become such a large part of the design of modern homes – why we see the installation of external post-boxes beyond locked property boundaries, automated gates and the widespread use of CCTV cameras.

Homeownership at the apex of the market has become an interesting thing. It is increasingly defended from literal parapets, crenelated mansions, and concealed panic rooms [where residents can flee](#) if the final defences are breached. As sociologists we should also want to offer some analysis that connects the social and historic moment we live in and the rise of these changes to the built environment around us. A number of factors appear to be of importance in explaining these changes. What we are now seeing appears to be the physical manifestation of a complex amalgam of psychological, economic and social forces that have taken precedence amidst a more unequal, insecure and status conscious society. In understanding these conditions it is clearer perhaps why the private home, not just for the wealthy, becomes a dream of our pursuit of that which might liberate us and of the kind of strategies for insulating ourselves from a society outside the front door that alarms us.

This kind of [privatism](#) can be seen as a social, political and spatial phenomenon. We appear more drawn into believing that private economic responses are more appropriate while also spending more time within private domestic spaces. This suggests that the withdrawal of the affluent into fortress homes and defended neighbourhoods can be connected to a wider social politics in which risky others are targeted in public and political discourse as well as policies that seek to tame, enclose or pacify particular spaces in line with the apparent needs of the affluent. These socio-political and physical changes in our cities appears to indicate major changes in the way that social life is conducted and new potential limits on the capacity of citizens to engage in free, open and pro-social forms of conduct in such spaces.

So an accelerating commodification of the home under neoliberalism, and the wider economic and social conditions that such systems tend to produce has generated a more emphatic social privatism by the affluent that can be linked to these more aggressive attempts to achieve social control in urban spaces.

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