From no place to nowhere

While the relationship may seem tenuous, listening to an interview with Werner Herzog regarding his latest documentary film made me think of Susan Dobson. Herzog notes that "wherever you go, there's another abyss."[1] Dobson has spent considerable time documenting and commenting on the banality of subdivisions and big box stores, stripping them down to their essentials, as she did in her series *Retail* where only the shapes of the stores hovered above the unending sea of the asphalt parking lot or in *Home Invasion*, a series depicting the construction of suburban housing in the sprawl of Southern Ontario and which she refers to as "large, hollow, inert structures, devoid of spirit stamped from identical moulds."[2] While slightly out of context, Herzog's "abyss" seems an appropriate term as more and more of the Canadian countryside is obliterated to make way for parking lots that continue to pave proverbial paradise. Dobson further frames the dystopia in urban sprawl in four series of new works featured in *By Design* and shown at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery (work unique to the Cambridge Galleries exhibition will be discussed by Iga Janik). Her continued interest in the deconstruction of suburban living and the identity of the occupants of these spaces is intriguingly examined by the superficiality of difference.

The field of urban sociology to which Dobson's work firmly belongs, originates, for many, from Jane Jacob's seminal book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, written in 1961. Jacobs writes:

> If the sameness of use is shown candidly for what it is—sameness—it looks monotonous. Superficially, this monotony might be thought of as a sort of order, however dull. But aesthetically, it unfortunately also carries with it a deep disorder: the disorder of conveying no direction. In places stamped with the monotony and repetition of sameness you move, but in moving you seem to have gotten nowhere.[3]

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[1] *Q*, CBC Radio, September 12, 2011
[2] Susan Dobson, *Home Invasion* Artist Statement, http://www.susandobson.com/invasion.htm
[3] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 223-224.

Many of us have had similar experiences in subdivisions: the instructions to turn "left here, left again, right, left and two more rights," until finally finding our way into the driveway of a suburban home. And consequently the inability to find one's way out of the warren of houses that are indistinguishable, one from another. The multitude of streets is supposed to hamper automobile drivers from speeding in family-centred enclaves, but my experience is that there are too few using streets or sidewalks to be concerned about. Jacob's words come to mind: "[b]ut look what we have built...Promenades that go from no place to nowhere and have no promenaders."[4] A second significant book written a decade after Jacob's, and dealing with the symbolism of architecture, is *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. They liken residential to commercial structures in their attempts to differentiate themselves:

> In residential sprawl the orientation of houses toward the street, their stylistic treatment as decorated sheds, and their landscaping and lawn fixtures—wagon wheels, mailboxes of erect chains, colonial lamps, and segments of split-rail fence—substitute for the signs of commercial sprawl as the definers of space.[5]

Thirty and forty years after these authors' works were published, Christine Frederick laments that the "standardization in the suburbs is not applied as it should be, to the comfort of living, but to the flattening out of personal individuality."[6] In the video *Nowhere in Particular*, Dobson shows the façades of twelve identical homes from an Oakville development (although the location is ultimately beside the point—being nowhere in particular). Each home is shown in all four seasons for 48 separate façades. In the video, one can hear an individual walking along the sidewalk—the voyeur looking at the fronts of the houses and wondering who is behind the door; the fact that Dobson projects her image at a height of 10' gives the viewer a sensation of being along for the walk. The video, which expands ways in which to examine Dobson's photography, takes

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[4] Ibid
[5] Robert Venturi, Denise Scot Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972/1977), 117.
[6] Chrisine Frederick, "Is Suburban Living a Delusion," as cited in Archer, John, *Architecture and Suburbia from English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 305.

the walker through the same street in all four seasons: one not only sees the difference of the seasons with the change of the leaves and the addition of snow, but it can be heard underfoot with the sound of boots in winter and the slapping of flip flops in the summer. Each house has four columns, two on either side of the doorway with a lintel overhead and three transom windows directly surrounding the door. Venturi et al, speak of wagon wheels and colonial lamp posts that differentiate the facades of 1970s homes; in Dobson's, individuality is attempted through the actual door, wreaths, plantings—in one case, a façade so covered in ivy as to make it all but obscure—and front step treatments (brick or flagstone seemingly the most popular). However, throughout the twenty-five minute loop of the video and despite the attempts at differentiation, the viewer is left with the distinct and somewhat disconcerting impression that he/she has seen this façade before: ironically, that which is added to make things distinct are, in all likelihood, purchased from rows of similar objects in the big box store around the corner. Jane Jacobs' ideal city includes human connections on public boulevards, although Dobson shows that despite our need to differentiate our homes with personal touches, as individuals, we still don't get out from behind the door. In her quest for "many little public sidewalk contacts,"[7] Jacobs was not thinking of whether the front step pot contained mums or impatience.

Sorbus Decora is a series of sixteen photographs of what is commonly referred to as the Showy Mountain Ash, a shrub that grows up to two metres in height and has blue-green leaves. In these works, Dobson strips away the house, doors, windows and steps to simply present the shrub in a clinical, white setting. These shrubs were planted in front of a standardized subdivision of townhouses and were planted by the builder for uniformity within the context of the development and consequently titled by Dobson with the unit number of each home. Interestingly, as Dobson notes "the shrubs have adopted identities of their own."[8] Indeed, some shrubs are kept carefully trimmed, some are straggly with weeds and yet other photographs ironically note shrubs-that-are-no-more with a specimen labels below an empty mass of white, entitled *Unit 856-removed* and *Units 862-868-*

[7] Op. cit., Jacobs, 56.
[8] Susan Dobson, Artist Statement, July, 2011.

removed. More than the indistinct decorative elements that owners have enlisted to distinguish the front of their homes from their neighbours' in *Nowhere in Particular*, the upkeep, or lack thereof in *Sorubs Decora*, seem to tell us so much more about the owners of the homes, homes that Dobson has, in the end, deleted from the photograph. The vegetation has become a player in suburban sprawl's need to break out from underneath the control of the builders and their attempts at homogenization and conformity.

Dobson's practice includes the manipulating of photography to illustrate a particular narrative as shown in the *Viburnum rafinequianum* series. T.J. Demos writes that:

> …traditionally, photography has been thought of as a "that has been" practice. Recent experimental photography has transformed this once-privileged tense into the far less secure future perfect—the "that will have been"—which proposes documenting a potential reality to come, or a new prospective of the past.[9]

The influential American photographer Ansel Adams photographed his first moonscape in 1941 calling it *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. Following that seminal piece, he made over a thousand images featuring the glowing full moon over a dramatic natural scene and securing his reputation as a photographer of the luminist landscape. In *Moonrise*, a suite of five large-format photographs, Dobson parodies Adams, or as per Demos, reveals a "new prospective of the past," by shining the moon over the most banal of landscapes including a residential enclave, a Canadian Tire store and an executive bungalow with pot lights beneath the eves that echo the glow of the moon. In *Real Estate Opportunity*, the moon takes centre-stage within a deep blue night sky and over a field of lush grasses. The barn to the left of the composition stands forlornly, until the two strips of red fire are noticed coming from within the structure, further elucidating the work's ironic title. Dobson has exchanged the magnitude of Ansel Adam's landscapes with a magnitude in presentation by printing large scale colour prints and setting them within light boxes that make them glow from within. What in Adams is a meditation on

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[9] T.J. Demos, introduction, *Viatmin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography* (New York and London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2006), 9.

landscape and its exotic and sublime features becomes, in Dobson's work, a meditation on the continuously uninspired aspects of land use in Southern Ontario. Dobson credits the influential work of American artist Edward Ruscha in the creation of this series, noting how he depicts simple landscapes to represent complex stories about contemporary society. Her glowing light boxes with richly coloured images are diametrically opposed to the subjects she depicts: large homes and empty stores are hardly a replacement for the Adams' sublime moonscapes. Dobson writes: "This contradictory response [to the viewer's attraction to the colouring and crisp detail in her photographs, and the simultaneous repulsion to the subject matter], interests me, as it parallels the conflicting practical and emotional considerations that go into choosing a neighbourhood and house in which to live (square footage versus an ideal neighbourhood for walking, for instance)."[10]

In the final series of photographs, Dobson shows full compositional close-ups of the sides of utilitarian industrial buildings usually found beyond suburbs, warehouses, and corporate headquarters. Unlike the photographs in the series *Retail*, where the buildings are reduced to grey silhouettes, this series is defined by subtle, yet ironic, details. What Dobson has focussed her lens on are the domesticated details of these industrial buildings. In *800 Biscayne Crescent*, a modernist structure suggesting three levels by solid horizontal elements that dissect corrugated verticals, focus is placed on a panelled door. But this isn't any panelled door—it's a door with raised sections that one would see in a suburban home—an attempt to humanize the employee entrance. An orange pylon with a pumpkin sitting beside it rests within a white-lined parking space, dwarfed by the enormous building behind it in *99 Franklin Boulevard*; the cottage-essential Muskoka chair waits its occupant in *8030 Industrial Drive*, while *8600 Regional Road 25*'s door is what would be expected within the industrial context: a nondescript sheet of metal. It's what's above and beside it that's of particular interest: a lintel above and a box of impatiens beside it. The flowers are not unlike what a suburbanite would place outside of their door in the hopes of distinguishing it, however, these flowers are much more

[10] Email from Susan Dobson to Linda Jansma, September 26, 2011.

intriguing than the ones in front of houses: these beg the question “who put them there?” There’s something poignant about this small gesture of humankind—a denotation of difference that is simultaneously amusing and tender.

James Howard Kunstler refers to suburban sprawl as the “geography of nowhere,” and fields of study such as psychogeography and environmental psychology examine how geographical setting affects mood and behaviour including both a sense of isolation and lack of community within them. Behind each door, employee entrance, and the ignored or trimmed Sorbus Decora, are individual people leading individual lives—ultimately attempting to reveal this individuality. Is Susan Dobson celebrating what she refers to as a quest for identity and the subversion of the banal, or is her work a diatribe revealing its anxiety-inducing inadequacies? Can stylization and adornment take the place of a yearning for community and recognition of self?

Linda Jansma