

No. 32

*The hours that hold the figure and the form
Have run their course within the house of dream*

We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected.

W. Benjamin. *One-way street.*

The kitchen had been painted fire-engine red and cream in high-gloss enamel. When we opened the cupboards under the sink, we could see the ground outside. The back bedroom was lime green high gloss on every surface. The laundry was purple. A previous owner had fallen prey to a psychiatric disorder that compelled him to decorate in this disturbing way. We had no money to alter it and the landlord was unconcerned.

The front room had been stripped back to the hessian lining and then re-papered with pages from the ODT. The entrance hall still boasted an original sideboard with umbrella stand and hand-painted black wall-paper in a Chinese motif of bamboo groves and flying cranes.

One June we shut the back door. It could not be opened again till the house dried out in spring. Because we had no key to the front door, all that winter entrance and exit was effected through the laundry window.

Removing any fixture from the wall involved a strenuous wrestle with accumulated paint. Layer upon layer, in often alarming colour juxtapositions. The outline of the object removed would remain in relief, often highlighted by a contrasting colour revealed beneath. New paint had hardly ever been used, so surfaces were marked by chunks of dried paint skin, oily swirls of badly-remixed separated ingredients, and crinkly runs of congealed enamel.

Once I awoke to find one of the neighbour's chickens had got in during the night and was pecking the carpet in my room. The entire house was splattered with birdshit, and I had a hangover.

The carpets were all 'landlord special', where every line of weave was a contrasting colour from the next almost-empty spool of yarn. Where the tenants had painted canvasses laid directly on the carpet, there might have been outlines left when the canvas was lift up, but a casual observer could not tell this.

The bathroom floor was a zinc sheet, finely annealed by decades of heels. Above the impressive staircase was a skylight in green and rose-coloured nineteenth century faceted glass. When the police came, they looked impressive in the afternoon light. Upstairs, further from the ground, the house was drier and in generally better condition.

No one ever cut the grass. There were the remains of standard roses out there, and a small wooden shed, which was held up by ivy. I took the door from it to make a desk, which I kept for three decades. It was painted in a rust-coloured dull-surfaced paint that I never removed, assuming it was lead-based. I had no evidence for that, but it seemed a safe bet. Instead I stapled corrugated cardboard over the top to inoculate it.

Who knows, perhaps that explains everything?

Bruce Russell

Lyttelton, May 2015