

What Patrick Keiller's 'Lost' Film Reveals About Our Housing Crisis



BY DAN HANCOX

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A rare screening of 'The Dilapidated Dwelling' (2000) at the Barbican shows why Keiller's films should be compulsory viewing



It seems like a very Patrick Keiller thing to have made a 'lost' film. His masterpiece, *London* (1994), is about a city with an absence at its heart – 'the first metropolis to disappear', as its profound, mic-drop of a conclusion renders it. The lost film in question, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000), is a serious, thoughtful investigation into the state of housing in the UK; originally commissioned by Channel 4 in 1996 as three 50-minute episodes, it was finally completed for a 2000 premiere, readied for a peak time-slot, and then never broadcast.

It is especially poignant that this should be the case: firstly, because this would have represented by far the most substantial and mainstream audience Keiller's essay-like, quasi-fictional style

would have ever reached, and on such a vital subject. Secondly, because of the timing: created at the hinge of a new era, in a period where the political mood still vibrated with the possibility of meaningful change under New Labour – and in that peculiar interregnum between the end of history and the war on terror – it was also, crucially, at the very start of the period that Britain's housing crisis went into overdrive.

This year, at a rare sold-out screening on 29 January at the Barbican in London, Keiller presented *The Dilapidated Dwelling*. It offers a persuasive and gently polemical take on the parlous state of British housing: that our housing stock is the oldest in Europe; indeed, at that time, a quarter of it had been built before the end of World War I. In the absence of the substantial public housing projects constructed in the decades following World War II, and with the introduction of the Right To Buy social-housing purchase scheme by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1980, new house building collapsed, and never recovered.



Patrick Keiller, *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, 2000, film still. Courtesy: the artist

As a result, Keiller argues, we live in damp, energy-inefficient homes, with cold walls and bad insulation, where corollary health problems are the norm. In environmental terms, we should be replacing existing stock far more regularly, not applying make-do-and-mend solutions to existing, mould-ridden homes. In one telling interview, the late Marxist historian Ellen Meiksins Wood contends that this situation is not illustrative of backwardness, or the 'arrested development' of British capitalism letting its infrastructure slump into decline; rather, it is an example of a

capitalist system working very well – better than any other in Europe – to further enrich developers, homeowners and landlords.

As in Keiller's *London*, *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), an unnamed, unseen, fictitious narrator (voiced excellently in *The Dilapidated Dwelling* by Tilda Swinton) has returned from overseas – the Arctic, no less – after decades away to survey the country she left behind. She arrives in a nation that still looks stuck and forlorn – 'so homemade', to recall another line from *London* – after 18 years of Conservative government. In a notable early scene, the camera's gaze lingers on chintzy living-room decor, unchanged since the 1970s, chiding us for our sloth, as a new millennium approaches.



Patrick Keiller, *Robinson in Space*, 1997, film still. Courtesy: the artist

For a documentary intended for terrestrial television, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* is pleasingly similar in style to Keiller's esoteric and wonderful *Robinson* films: the camera never pans or zooms; instead, we are presented with a series of static shots. (Keiller refers to his work as photography not cinematography.) The narrative is drily humorous, without ever showing off, and takes regular detours to indulge snippets of literary and intellectual history, providing an oblique insight into the present. 'I decided to visit the house where *Tristram Shandy* was written,' is not a line that has featured in many films about the housing crisis, but these fictional digressions help build to a greater documentary truth.

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The only concessions to a more conventional documentary style in *The Dilapidated Dwelling* are the inclusion of talking-head interviews with real academic experts, architects and designers – the appearance of a phenomenally smug James Dyson, boasting of his commitment to R&D, provoked audience snickering – and some delightful archive footage, in particular of Buckminster Fuller, both being interviewed and featuring his world-building contributions to the 1967 Montreal Expo. We are shown numerous innovative approaches to construction – from Walter Segal’s self-built homes in the UK, to the potential inspirations we have long ignored from countries like Japan and Sweden – all of which shows Meiksins Wood’s argument to be right: the answers to our housing crisis are there if we want them, and always have been, but it suits the British establishment to maintain the creaky, damp-ridden status quo.

How bad are things now? Rough sleeping has **doubled** <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-42817123>> in the last five years, 100,000 families are in temporary accommodation and it was **reported** <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/housing-homeless-crisis-homes-a8356646.html>> last year that we now have the biggest housing shortfall in British history. While Keiller’s narrator laments in *The Dilapidated Dwelling* that house building in the late 1990s has fallen to just 180,000 homes per year – from a high of more than 350,000 per year in the mid-1960s – the annual rate has subsequently **fallen even further** <<https://fullfact.org/economy/house-building-england/>> . Japan, by contrast, builds 1.2 million new homes a year.

After the screening, Keiller and writer Owen Hatherley took to the stage for a brief, entertaining discussion. Keiller was typically and endearingly self-effacing: surely, watching *The Dilapidated Dwelling* now, he must feel vindicated by the last 20 years, Hatherley asked? ‘Not really,’ Keiller replied, changing the subject. But he acknowledged that the same problems remain. He spoke incredulously of some of the middle-class households in Oxford, where he now lives: seeing families ‘with huge, expensive cars in the front drive, but living in hovels – houses you could pull apart with your bare hands’.

Ever-intensifying profit extraction from the basic human right to shelter has been one of British capitalism’s greatest successes – and one of the British public’s most saddening, ongoing defeats. We need Keiller’s keen eyes on its ever-more-daring transgressions. And we need to ensure this ‘lost’ work is found again, too.

Main image: Patrick Keiller, The Dilapidated Dwelling, 2000, film still. Courtesy: the artist

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