

# CORRIDORS

*Passages of Modernity*

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*Untitled Corridor Project*

You may remember it differently but  
all I see is one long corridor  
hot-wired to the nervous system  
I feel the change in pressure on my face

a corporate corridor  
vacuum cleaners sashaying in wide arcs  
a ship's corridor  
portholes reflected like a row of buttons  
on the floor

a hotel corridor  
where fear feels like a solid thing  
and music leaks from the ceiling

upgrading to an airport corridor  
a shadowless hospital corridor  
with an ending phoned-in by the gods

I suspect the scenery is changed behind me  
that I walk in an endless loop  
a recession of dead spaces

note the identifying thread in the carpet  
that print repeated on the wall

just in case  
I carry an ampoule of poison into the hall

Chris Greenhalgh

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,  
One need not be a house;  
The brain has corridors surpassing  
Material place.

Emily Dickinson

# Introduction

Every workday morning I step out of the door of my somewhat battered post-war duplex onto the 60-metre (200 ft) concrete deck of my housing block and walk to the end staircase. I take the London Underground for a couple of stops, through Farringdon to King's Cross, the oldest stretch of track in the network, first opened in 1863. Since 2010 the Circle Line (although it no longer circles) has been upgraded to connected corridor carriages, so at quiet times you get a snaking sightline down the whole train. I leave King's Cross through the Euston Road exit: since the arrival of the Eurostar terminus, the lower level has been transformed into a shopping arcade. My office in Gordon Square, in disreputable Bloomsbury, is in the row of Georgian town houses once owned by Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, and later by Maynard Keynes. These houses, rented by the University of London, used to be a warren of backstairs and convoluted passages. To get between the houses sometimes involved descending to the basement or up to the garrets in the loft to move across the load-bearing walls. A refit has now punched lateral corridors through the building, imposing some degree of logic, although they twist and turn, still mark the boundaries of the separate houses, and it is common to find lost souls wandering the hallways bewildered by the elusive room-numbering system.

This is a journey dominated by corridors, that quintessentially modern space. There is a complex history in this short journey – moving



Access deck of the Golden Lane estate, London, built 1957–62.

from that clouded dream of Modernist collective housing, of shared decks and communal living, through a Victorian transport corridor on a corridor train first introduced, with much fanfare, in the 1890s, getting off through a shopping arcade that was a wholly new kind of commercial space in the 1810s, to a university that in its idealist, expansionist phase in the twentieth century saw the corridor as a model of enlightened, circulating knowledge, a place of exchange where the disciplines would flow together.

Yet, to be honest, these spaces are merely *passages*, volumes to pass through on the way to somewhere else. These are the parts of the journey most likely to be done on autopilot, the minutes and hours vanishing into routine habit. Dead time and dead space.

Architectural history tends to agree. ‘Corridor’ entered the English language in the early eighteenth century, yet as late as 1978 Robin Evans declared that ‘the history of the corridor . . . has yet to be written.’ Paul Olivier, in the exhaustive *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture*, remarks in a brief entry that ‘The word “corridor” is among the rarest in the books on vernacular architecture, reflecting both the neglect that they have received, and their passing function.’ When the French experimental writer Georges Perec decided that he would write about the everyday modern spaces to which we ordinarily pay no attention and retain no memory, his first instances are ‘towns . . . or the corridors of the Paris Métro, or a public park’. Corridors recur throughout the foreword to his *Species of Spaces*, but perhaps symptomatically Perec then fails to write another word about them, as if they remain invisible even to the master of the forgotten and overlooked.<sup>1</sup>

Why this disregard? Most office jobs are now located in open-plan offices, which emerged in the 1950s as a model of post-war modernization and efficiency. Many office workers now live in spaces where the internal walls, so loved in domestic settings by the Victorians, have been knocked down and the interiors opened up. The middle classes read lifestyle magazines that have been selling a vision of wall-free, corridorless loft living since the drive to recapitalize old inner-city industrial spaces in the 1980s. This open plan is not only for hipsters and gentrifiers. We do not wait for hospital appointments in corridors in new hospitals any more, but sit in vast, open glass atria. Every winter, when the British health service comes under intense pressure, the worst hospital nightmare is to be stranded in an in-between place: ‘Stroke victim spent 54 hours in corridor.’<sup>2</sup> This is an *anti-corridor* world.

Corridors are now regarded as infrastructure, the underpinning service elements of the world that are too big, or buried, or boring, to deserve comment. Infrastructure ‘seldom sustains mindful attention, manifesting instead the stuff of an unremarked substrate simply

servicing the basics of everyday life'.<sup>3</sup> Drains, cable pipes, vents, service roads, electrical substations – and corridors. It is engineers, not architects, who pore over schematics of large-scale trade and transport corridors, or plan ecological corridors – a metaphorical extension that seemed to arrive in the 1960s just as domesticated corridors were disappearing. It is engineers, not architects, who ensure compliance with health and safety rules, for instance that Fire Exit corridors hidden away in the shameful back-room quarters of modern buildings conform to International Building Codes. These define an exit corridor as a continuous and unobstructed path of egress from any occupied portion of a building to a public way. They must meet the minimum width restrictions, which remains roughly two shoulder-widths wide, one for the column of evacuees to exit, one for the column of fire service personnel to enter. Surely these are technical matters for the engineer, not the architect, so that the corridor becomes what Stephan Trüby has called an un-architecture.

If you buy any popular architectural guide, such as *How to Read Houses* or *How to Read a Building*, the corridor will not feature in it. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* famously explores 'the power of attraction of all the domains of intimacy' in the home, but only passingly mentions 'nooks and corridors'.<sup>4</sup> We want to know about the resonance of rooms, not the passages between them. Doorways and thresholds have rich literature and history dedicated to their profound symbolic resonances: from the earliest cultural traces, 'the idea of passage and transition functioned as a key paradigm for the discovery and acquisition of new knowledge,' Daniel Jütte explains in his marvellous survey of the door-as-symbol, *The Strait Gate*.<sup>5</sup> Is there an equivalent for the corridor? Not really.

Yet at the same time as this disappearing act, I found that I was seeing corridors everywhere in cinema, on tv, in computer games. Whenever I explained to someone that I was writing a cultural history of the corridor, nearly everyone's first reference point was Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980), where we watch the young boy

## INTRODUCTION

Danny hurtle through the labyrinths of the Overlook Hotel on his tricycle, drawing impossible figures as he loops through those confounding spaces. These short scenes stick in the mind because viewers had literally never seen anything like this before. Kubrick took the relatively new invention of the Steadicam and turned it upside down, so that it rested close to the floor where the angle made the corridor a looming, terrifying space revealed in the frictionless glide of what we know is a malignant, inhuman gaze stalking the young boy.

*The Shining* revealed something about the emotional latency of corridors: a simple lesson in the social construction of space. Before *The*

Danny riding his tricycle through the Overlook Hotel,  
from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).



*Shining*, the haunted house had been about the verticality of staircases, attics and basements, the house as a stratified metaphor of the conscious and unconscious mind (think of *Psycho*, the detective climbing the steps to his doom, while Norman's mother rots in the basement and his victims sink into the lower depths of the swamp beyond the motel). After *The Shining*, however, dread lurked in the unhistoried horizontal horror of corridors, in the anonymous modernity of hotel vistas and the bland hallways of public institutions.

This corridor trick has been repeated in a thousand horror films and computer games, where the corridor plan becomes an uninterrupted, unfolding space that at once limits the action but multiplies the threats of menace from off-screen space as the camera moves forward. The earliest video games in the 1970s were based on mazes or labyrinths, and famous breakthrough computer games of the 1990s such as *Doom* or the first version of *Resident Evil* mainly involved running about in corridors. Any glimpse at contemporary film or tv will reveal cameras intent on corridor spaces, from the CCTV fixed on the void of the landing space beyond the bedroom door in *Paranormal Activity* (2007), to the exuberant swoops through the passages of the haunted house, the asylum or the hotel in the *American Horror Story* tv franchise, or the soulless scientific lab-mazes of secret military-industrial complexes that form the principal spaces of the *Resident Evil* series, or *Stranger Things* or *Westworld*. There is a whole sub-genre of 'corridor as gauntlet', where our heroes have to fight from one end of a corridor to another through impossible numbers of violent antagonists, from *Hard Boiled* and *Oldboy* via *World War Z* or *The Raid* to Netflix's *Daredevil*. Perhaps the most influential horror novel of recent times has been Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* (2000), which concerns the appearance of an impossible corridor, resolutely empty yet utterly terrifying, in the small domestic house of the Navidson family.

The interesting questions then become: why and when did the corridor start to be associated with fear? Or, if not fear (not every

corridor promises spooky twins, hordes of ninjas or a gauntlet of zombies, after all), then the tone of those quieter unnerved emotions of anxiety, eeriness or dread? In 1968 a group of community planners and architects declared that ‘long corridors with many rooms off them are dysfunctional; people dislike them; they represent bureaucracy and monotony.’ They designed from the premise that ‘long corridors set the scene for everything bad about modern architecture.’<sup>6</sup> Was this a turning point, when it was felt that there was something destructive about the large-scale corridor plan in public buildings or social housing, a Kafkaesque annihilation of the self in the plunging single-point perspective of the institutional corridor? At about the same time, the oppressive instrumental rationality of modern bureaucracy was represented by the office corridor in Jean-Luc Godard’s science-fiction-of-the-present *Alphaville* (1965).

In a slightly different way, the architects Joshua Cameroff and Ker-Shing Ong suggest a kind of dialectic between structure and infrastructure, open visible design and closed-off, invisible function, in modern architecture:

Modern buildings, like modern subjects, thus came to contain unspeakable cavities. Channeled winds, mobile waste, captive lightning – all of these are smuggled into the walls of the home and the office. Those who work in design and construction are familiar with these obscure and recessive spaces, how they contradict the resolved bourgeois exterior. Simply put, they are a mess. In order to sustain this disappearing act, the modern partition is conceived as a complex assembly of membranes, organized around a vacancy. Again, this is quite recent. The walls of the pre-modern building had no unseemly interior.<sup>7</sup>

The answer, they might suggest, is that just as the corridor ostensibly seems to vanish in modern design, it rears back up as a kind of return of the repressed, inevitably tinged with horror. The gleaming white

cube still needs its sewage outlets, its back-room service corridors, its fire exits.

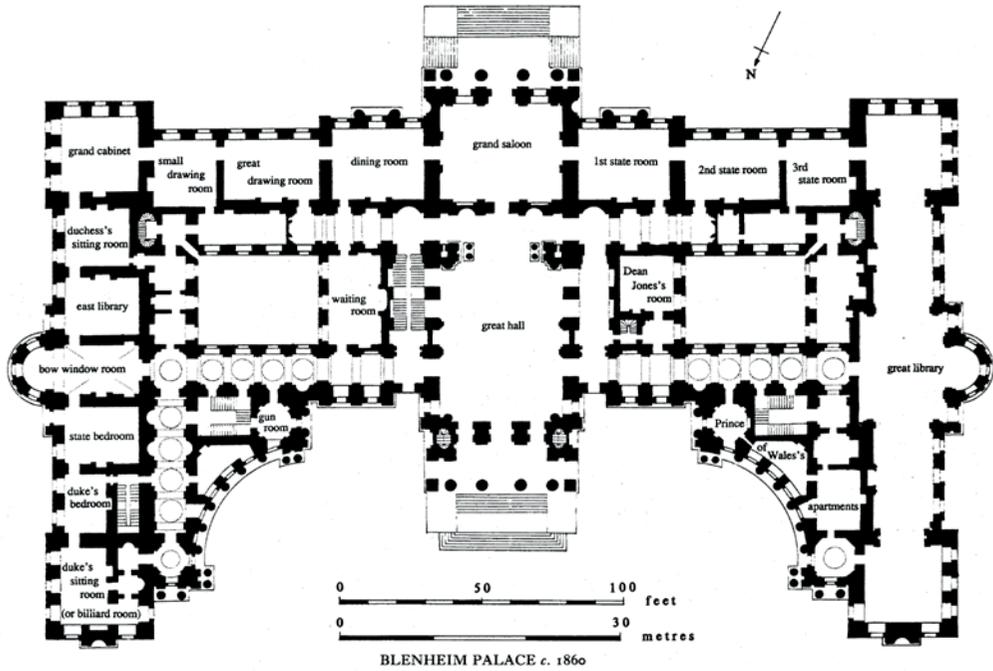
But there is a longer and more complex genealogy to the strange emotional tenor of corridors, and this book is an effort to trace this history from the first appearance of the corridor in Western architecture to its strange afterlife as simultaneously disregarded infrastructure or overextended metaphor. This is a cultural history rather than a strict architectural one, moving across sources from the built environment, spatial theory, public policy, fiction, painting and varieties of screens, to capture the shifting resonances of the corridor.

The corridor emerges with the Enlightenment as a newly rational proposal for the distribution of private and public space, and I want to argue that its development and changing meanings offers a striking account of the trajectory of modernity itself. The handful of histories available often regards the corridor as a device of class distinction and social separation, particularly in the bourgeois home of Protestant northern Europe, and particularly in the nineteenth century. Symptomatically enough, when Windsor Castle was rebuilt for George IV from 1824 by Jeffry Wyattville, the new distribution centred on the 168-metre-long (550-ft) Grand Corridor, which divided staterooms, guest rooms and private family quarters. Robert Kerr, whose book *The Gentleman's House* became the touchstone for Victorian mansion-building in the 1860s, was entirely obsessed with corridors as devices to secure the middle-class private life and separate family from servants. He returns compulsively to the corridor because it is a fraught and liminal space of passage, a place where social divides are asserted but might collapse at any moment.

However, it is also important to remember that the new-fangled corridor was also thoroughly imbued with ideas of rational reform and social improvement as soon as it emerged. Indeed, it was considered so transformational a space that the corridor was intrinsic to many utopian conceptions of public spaces for well over a century, from Charles Fourier's phalanstery, which housed people along a gallery

that promised infinite unalienated happiness and sexual possibility in 1807, to the socialist town planners of post-1945 England, who built around the communal corridor as the structure that might redefine selfhood itself, just as prison reformers, asylum builders and Soviet collectivists had believed before them. The curdling of that utopian prospect after the 1960s is what has at once eclipsed the corridor and yet ensured its persistence in the cultural imagination as a space of either monotonous bureaucratic uniformity or of Gothic unease and dread.

This, in capsule, is the story that I want to tell. Recovering this history has allowed me to see the bland, overlooked volumes of everyday life, the *infrastructural stuff* we spend so much time just passing through, really for the first time. I hope to pass this act of re-vision on to you and make you think about these apparently dead, transitional spaces in a new kind of way. So let's start with first things first: the arrival of the corridor.



The floor plan of Blenheim Palace, c. 1860.