

DEAD ENDS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PETER BENZ**

When is a dead end really ... dead? In this essay, **Peter Benz** explores the three ways one can navigate out of a dead end.

"Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached."

— Franz Kafka, Aphorism

Since 1985, German artist Gregor Schneider has been working on the transformation of the house he inherited from his parents in the small city of Rheyne, turning it into a maze of rooms-within-rooms, hidden chambers, false walls, and abrupt dead ends. Visitors to the *Haus u r*—as he calls it—describe the experience as uncomfortable, creepy,

or even threatening, despite it actually just being a somewhat peculiar, empty domestic space.

The disturbing quality of the space seems to emanate specifically from the everyday setting that has been turned negative through senseless spatial twists. Staircases without ends and doors with only



a wall behind suggest some darker, hidden reality which is then turned into nightmarish scenarios in the visitor's imagination.

In that way, the *Haus u r* literally brings to life the concept of "uncanny" as described by Sigmund Freud in *The Uncanny* (1919): a traditional home turning "unhomely" against the visitor.

The architecture critic Anthony Vidler elaborates on this idea in his book *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) and applies it to the condition of contemporary cities. He does so by reflecting on the works of a number of leading architects; however, through this approach Vidler only acknowledges the uncanny as a pre-planned, and thus intended architectural effect, and leaves unmentioned the experience of spaces that are less semantically charged.

Dead ends, for example, are usually not planned as such and cannot be defined spatially: they may come in the guise of closed-off corridors, blocked back alleys, or even unfinished bridges. They can

be indoors or outdoors, they can have or not have any numbers of surrounding walls, they can be obvious or not. They simply don't have any kind of common aesthetic, functional or semantic feature, except that they have only one way to enter into them, which infers you have to use the same way to exit.

But even with this one obligatory feature, it is still difficult to establish a dead end, as not all spaces with just one entry are considered dead ends. One entry/exit only is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a dead end. Imagine a bedroom that is a perfectly comfortable place to meet your lover, but suddenly turns into a treacherous dead end the moment the husband arrives. The perception of the space changes with the situation.

Accordingly, a space is a dead end only if it is experienced as dead-ended. Dead ends are thus an entirely phenomenological category, and because that is the case, dead ends are a fluent concept. A space that is just any other space at one occasion

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becomes a dead end the moment one wants to leave it not in the same way as one entered it—for whatever reason.

As mentioned above, dead ends are usually not intentional, except for the suburban cul-de-sacs, thought to reduce through-traffic and thereby pollution, crime and other disturbances. According to a feature on American National Public Radio, US homebuyers are prepared to pay 20 percent more for a house in a dead end, where—as another statistic suggests—they will then turn nice and fat, as people living in dead ends tend to be more obese than others because they rely more on their cars and exercise less.

More interesting than these suburban safe havens are those dead ends that simply happen. Accidental spaces, produced by unforeseen circumstances—a change of plan, a failed re-arrangement, some unsolved ownership-issues et cetera—produce a leftover space, unwanted, without function, without looks, an inconvenient, meaningless truth. It is

this apparent senselessness that makes a dead end so unhomely: one can read the space, but cannot understand the reason for its existence.

This pre-determination of the space also makes dead ends such a well appreciated—almost cheap—motif when it comes to its appearance in fiction. There seems to be this unwritten law in storytelling: if your storyline does not make any progress, let the characters run into a dead end and you are sure to have a climatic showdown.

The whole mechanism is fairly obvious. Interestingly it is especially common in television series: there are plenty of dead ends in *Charlie's Angels*, *The Fall Guy*, *Knight Rider* et cetera. On the one hand, this is probably because the moving image has an especially appropriate vocabulary to adequately communicate the spatial experience of a dead end—wobbly hand-held camera, fast pans, abrupt cuts, long shadows, heavy breathing at the audio-level. On the other hand, as each episode has to be done and over with in the



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short span of 40 minutes, catalysts are needed to speed up the plot. A situation that forces a decision-making in whatever direction has to be most welcome there.

After all there are only three ways out of a dead end. The least interesting obviously is to simply go back the way you came. As discussed before, this actually is not an option as a dead end is defined by the (sometimes only perceived) impossibility to go back.

The second possibility would be to find—maybe after some searching—a second way out, in which case the dead end is—strictly speaking—not a dead end at all. However, usually this option would at

least require a significant change of medium—from driving to walking; from moving horizontally along the street to vertically up the fire escape; and/or a significant amount of personal initiative—often of a rather destructive nature such as breaking open the only locked door in sight, crashing through the brick wall at the end of the lane, stacking a tower of waste bins to jump over a fence, and so on.

Thirdly, there is external intervention, the good old *dues ex machina*: a rope suddenly dangling from the roof, a gutter opening in the ground, even—totally cheesy—an angel airlifting out the lost ...

Apart from these three solutions the only other option is to stay in the dead end, and—usually after some internal struggle—face the situation ahead. If this scenario falls short of giving birth to a new mutant superhero, it will at least trigger a moment of self-conscious realisation.

Because that is what dead ends do. ■