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# *I Am in Eskew: Soundscape, Cityscape and Mindscape of Hostile Architecture*

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**ABSTRACT:** *I Am in Eskew* is the epitome of an independent podcast, written, produced and performed by two people – Jon Ware and Muna Hussen. It tells the story of David Ward (Jon Ware), a man trapped in the city of Eskew, where nightmares become real. The story offers manifold answers and interpretations, depending which genre and mode of reception we choose to follow. On a literal level it is a fantasy horror story about a cursed city that tortures its entrapped residents by creating cityscapes full of monsters, spatial and body horror (Eskew as a landscape); on a metaphorical level *I Am in Eskew* is a representation of mental illness and mental disorders (Eskew as a mindscape). The present article discusses the use of medium in *I Am in Eskew* and the capabilities of podcasts in creating an immersive horror story (Eskew as a soundscape) as well as possible interpretations of the podcast, focusing on the concept of hostile architecture as an expression of the late capitalist inclination to dehumanize various aspects of human life (space, relationships etc.). The article discusses hostile architecture as a form of narration and narration as a form of hostile architecture through the lens of Derridian hauntology.

**KEYWORDS:** hauntology; ghost city; media representation; mental illness; hostile architecture; horror podcast

## **Introduction**

*I Am in Eskew* is a 30-episodes-long horror podcast that aired from January 2018 to November 2019. It was written by Jon Ware. In 2021 *I Am in Eskew* became a part of the Rusty Quill Network, a British entertainment and podcast company, known for being the producers of *The Magnus Archive*. *Eskew* is the epitome of an independent podcast, written, produced and performed by two

people (Jon Ware and Muna Hussien) within minimalistic conditions. As Ware noted, the process of production per episode was very quick, with recording and audio-editing happening during the weekends out of necessity (Ware 2018). The popularity of *Eskew* allowed Ware to continue his career in podcasting with the ongoing production of *The Silt Verses*, a much more developed title with professional audio production.

*I am in Eskew* tells the story of David Ward (Jon Ware), a man trapped in the city of Eskew where nightmares become real. The first-person narration is autobiographical and presented in the form of meta-fiction – it emphasizes its own medium as David acts as independent podcast host. It makes it possible for the audience to take the dispatches from Eskew in a “pseudo-documentary” style of reception, thus “ascrib[ing] credence to it and enter[ing] into [it] imaginatively, while remaining aware that it is make-believe” (Mheallaigh 2018: 403). The semi-anonymous style of production (Ware 2018), the play-pretend mode of reception and the carefully styled soundscape are the means of immersion into the existential horror of Eskew to the extent that the listener may also experience the city of Eskew with dread and terror. As such, *I Am in Eskew* is an embodiment of the medium’s capabilities.

*I Am in Eskew* exhibits numerous tendencies of contemporary podcasts in its style and content, including an incisive critique of late capitalism as an inhuman force. In case of *Eskew* it takes the form of corporate-created spatial horror of hostile architecture, integrated in the cityscape, thoroughly crafted so as to be a source of discomfort and enmity for its inhabitants, leading to the escalation of violence and mental illness. The podcast is quite ambiguous in its meanings, allowing a multiplicity of interpretations, be it as a story of a literal ghost city (Eskew as a haunted cityscape) or as a story of a neurotic, anxious man whose mental illness forces him to see a city as monstrous (Eskew as a mindscape, projection of the protagonist’s fears and paranoia).

The present article discusses the use of medium in *I Am in Eskew* and the capabilities of podcasts in creating an immersive horror story as well as possible interpretations of the podcast, focusing on the concept of hostile architecture as an expression of the late capitalist inclination to dehumanize various aspects of human life (space, relationships etc.). *I Am in Eskew* presents narration as a form of hostile architecture (David and other prisoners of Eskew creating their own torture through the stories about their fears) and hostile architecture as a form of narration (fate) of a character living within the cursed city (spatial determinism).

## Methodology

The concept of hauntology comes from Jacques Derrida’s 1993/1994 French and English publication of *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* and is rooted in Marxism as well as psychoanalysis, with its key notions being those of inheritance and intergenerational trauma. Hauntology refers to a disjunction of time, marking the specter

as a differed presence, a remnant of the past (Derrida 1994: 20–21) as well as an *arrivant*, a harbinger of “what has not yet arrived” (Blanco, Peeren 2013: 13). Avery Gordon applied hauntology to social studies in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and Social Imagination*, stating that “[...] haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)” (Gordon 2008: xvi). The sociological approach to hauntology, especially in the *arrivant* mode of the specter (Blanco, Peeren 2013: 13), is efficacious in analyzing social problems or, to be more accurate, in diagnosing which current social practices will produce the “ghost” of the future. Not only do we live within the specters of the past but we also actively contribute to production of future ghosts by various forms of exclusion and oppression. Hostile architecture, for example, is a social practice that turns contemporary cities into ghostlands, haunted by the everlasting presence of “unwelcomed”. *I Am in Eskew* takes the metaphor of hostile architecture literally, presenting the city as determined to devour its citizens and by that emphasizing the dehumanizing aspect of this social practice.

The relationship between cityscape and soundscape has been a subject of numerous studies in such fields as anthropology, cultural geography and ethnomusicology, whose conclusion is that space and sound cannot be considered separate entities but, rather, a single entity as we experience places through all the senses (Feld 2005: 179). As Colin Ripley puts it: “the qualities of a space affect how we perceive a sound and those of a sound affect how we perceive a space” (2007: 2). Eckehard Pistrick and Cyril Isnart discuss sonic practices as place-making, emphasizing “the role of sound in appropriating and humanizing space, turning it into a place, a site of human intervention and sociocultural practice” (2013: 503). The opposite is also true – an unfamiliar sound in a familiar place is the most effective tool of triggering the sense of unease, which also results in de-familiarization of space. Sound effects are the core element of horror cinema, the “jump scare” (the harsh contrast between silence-stillness and noise-movement) being the most obvious example. Interesting remarks from Rowland Atkinson (2007) about how urban spaces are demarcated by sound with the most important distinction between sound and noise (unwanted sound) could be used to broaden the notion of hostile architecture as silence (or control upon the soundscape) in urban spaces becomes a privilege of the few who can afford distancing themselves from the unwanted sounds (police sirens, neighbors’ screams, advertisements etc.). This could also be read through the lens of hauntology, as the noise in this context becomes a Derridian specter, unwanted and incorporeal reminder of the (returning) displaced. *I Am in Eskew* thematizes the structure of urban soundscape, especially its hostile aspects, as the city of Eskew relentlessly sends vocal and audio messages to its inhabitants (and by extension – the audience). The podcast literally provides voice for the hostile architecture, as the horror city messages those

living within it, telling them to dig, run, hide and kill themselves. The podcast carefully crafts its soundscape to convey the sense of danger, unfamiliarity and unease, de-familiarizing ordinary sounds (rainfall), places (a railway bridge) and social situations (therapy) to the point of inducing paranoia in its listeners. It should be noted, however, that this article is a case study in podcast studies and, therefore, it only uses the concepts of soundscape (and its relation to cityscape and mindscape) to analyze the sound effects of *I Am in Eskew* (mostly as tools of immersion).

I will use the concept of a “mental image” introduced by Kevin Lynch in 1960 to describe a subjective perception of a city (Lynch 1990: 2). For my purpose here I will use the term “mindscape” (a mental or psychological scene) to emphasize that the perception of a given environment is not separable from the quality of the personal experience of space itself. The concept of mindscape is especially useful in the context of podcasts as pre-recorded audio files that offer displaced, incorporeal sounds “addressing the mind rather than the sight” (Soltani 2018: 194). The concept of “mindscape,” therefore, will be used to describe the fictional characters’ experience of *Eskew* as well as the listeners’ perception of the world in terms imposed by the podcast (dehumanizing practices of late capitalism metaphorically presented as “hauntings”). Andy McCumber offers an interesting analysis concerning the construction of place in the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. McCumber based his analysis on classic works from Barbara Johnstone (1990) and Kent Ryden (1993) concluding that “»invisible landscape« of social meaning [is] superimposed on the physical one” as “place is created socially, and through a process that calls into question any clear distinction between real and imagined” (McCumber 2018: 73), which makes it possible to conceptualize *Night Vale* as a place, even though not a physical one. According to McCumber, *Night Vale* is constructed through the listenership and “in terms of a central contradiction between its own rules and those of its listeners’ world” (2018: 76). *Eskew*, on the contrary, is “placed” at the beginning as a nightmare realm; it later becomes apparent that *Eskew*’s monstrosities are just exaggerated features of our reality. The relativity of the concept of space sounds like a truism in the discourse of contemporary social constructionism but its implications in the city landscape spiked with hostile architecture – a reminder of unwelcoming non-presence of certain people that is haunting the landscapes – are yet to be discussed in connection with hauntology and sound studies; all of which *I Am in Eskew* puts into practice.

### **An ASMR Immersive Horror Podcast**

*I Am in Eskew* operates within the genre of existential horror, which is presented as the sense of isolation, loneliness, insignificance, inevitability, uncertainty, meaninglessness, lack of choice or a lack of consequences despite the choice being made as if one’s deeds have no real impact upon the world. Existential horror is a prominent mode of horror production across many popular fictional podcasts, such as *Welcome to Night Vale*, *The Magnus Archive*, *Archive 81*,

TANIS, *The White Vault* and more. The intimacy of the medium<sup>1</sup> and the means of perception emphasize the message of existential terror – the listener experiences the story precisely as a lonely individual within the vast and unfriendly world, as the soundscape of the podcast becomes the soundscape of the listener. As Farokh Soltani notes, listening through headphones creates a situation where there “is no distance between the listener and the source of sound: the audio-drama is plugged directly into the listener’s inner ear, obscuring most day-to-day sound; it does not occur within the auditory field – it becomes the field itself” (2018: 203). As such, the “podcast becomes the entire content of the listener’s world—experienced through direct perceptual encounter within the auditory field, rather than through deliberative focus” (2018: 203). The process of immersion into the fictional world becomes almost involuntary, as the listener is positioned within the fictional reality – articulated through the sound – that surrounds them completely, although not physically. Therefore, listening to the podcast creates a specific mindscape, crafted by the means of the sound.

In the case of *Eskew* the intimacy of the medium becomes claustrophobic, closing around the listener. The threat of being in *Eskew* is presented precisely as inevitability, the horror that is yet to come and that nothing can be done about. Not only does David promise the diegetic audience of his podcast (and by extension – the extra-diegetic audience of *I Am in Eskew*) multiple times that they will come to *Eskew* (episode 2, 3), but also by episode 19 we are aware that *Eskew* is, indeed, expanding, and, therefore, it will become impossible to escape the city as it will be everywhere. The city of *Eskew* is the Deridian *arrivant*, a specter of a terrible future that will come, a future where every city is like *Eskew*. Most importantly, *Eskew* is creeping upon us with its soundscape over the process of listening, in a perfect combination of form and content, showing off the possibilities of the medium as the metaphorical border of *Eskew* is crossed with the sound.

The way in which *Eskew* leaks into the “reality” (both the “reality” beyond the ghost city in the fictional world and the reality of extra-diegetic listeners) is through the sound of rainfall. It is rain that announces our arrival in *Eskew*, which can happen on a London street as well as on a rail station of a nameless Italian city (episode 30, 14). Every episode starts with the sound of rainfall. The sound is also a background noise throughout almost every episode, because in *Eskew* it always rains, which evokes a depressive autumn atmosphere. The environmental soundscape and sound effects draw extra-diegetic listeners into the landscape of *Eskew* together with the narration, letting them physically experience the podcast in the manner typical to ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) audio and video. Stimuli used in the ASMR productions cause a general state of relaxation, a nearly meditative state of mind and body. In the case of *Eskew*, the soothing sound of rain accompanies the voice of

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1 Podcasts are most likely to be listened to on headphones or within private spaces in a single sitting per episode (see Berry 2016; McHugh 2016).

a tired, resigned and depressed person who describes disturbing daily events in the city of terror and body horror through which the city has perverted its inhabitants. The sound and the narration bluntly contrast with each other, resulting in the most unsettling effect<sup>2</sup>. The sound of rain becomes unnerving in comparison, an ominous sign of getting closer to Eskew and its spatial horrors and a specter itself as an ordinary and familiar sound becomes a disturbing noise, harbinger of Eskew's terror.

The voice of Jon Ware is the link between the soundscape and narration as it conveys emotional profundity, giving the narration an emotional texture. As a voice actor Ware perfectly expresses depression and hopelessness, staying seemingly emotionless and unmoved throughout the course of various horrid events, but also suggesting the depth of hurt inflicted upon the character by Eskew. Thus, the apparent indifference can be seen as a carefully crafted shield against the world or a psychological coping mechanism, a strategy necessary to survive in the hostile world of Eskew. Indeed, almost everything that David does is a coping mechanism of some sort; even the podcast itself serves this function as David confesses: "I share Eskew, my experiences of Eskew, in the hopes of forgetting what's happened to me" (episode 2), which also makes him an unreliable narrator, purposefully omitting and ignoring some aspects of his experience.

### **Are We (in) Eskew? The Blurred Sounds of Fiction and Reality**

The immersion into the fictional world and its sense of existential horror also emanate from narrative tools. The line between fiction and reality becomes blurred through the justification of the use of the podcast format so that the story is presented as semi-fictional, in a pseudo-documentary manner. Another example of this blurring is the relationship between the narrator and the implied (and extra-diegetic) audience.

Fictional horror podcasts use various narrative tools to justify or motivate the use of recording and broadcasting (investigating journalism in case of Pacific Northwest Stories productions such as *TANIS*, *The Black Tapes*, *Rabbits*, *The Last Movie* and *Fairies*; a radio program from an unknown town – *Welcome to Night Vale*; found or discovered recordings – *Archive 81*; a recording of archival materials or a "real-time" recording of supernatural events – *The Magnus Archive*, *The White Vault*). In this way the podcasts evoke an early tradition of

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2 Episode 23, *Mindfulness*, is produced in the same manner. It is the only non-fictional episode in the series, accompanied by the sound of crashing waves instead of the rainfall. Jon Ware reads the fourth of the nine-tape collection of a guided meditation course. It seems at first to be a normal stress relief exercise where the listener is relaxing on the beach, except it is gradually revealed that there is a gigantic sea creature under the water a few feet away from them and a monstrous monkey creeping up in the trees behind them. The tide is rising and the listener is forced to decide which creature will prey on them. The narrator mocks the listener for failing to relax in these circumstances: "Already you've ruined this. Forget the breathing. Clearly you can't be helped". The contrast between the form, the sound effects (specially the calm voice of the narrator) and the narration is stressed here to the maximum.

literary fiction, the topos of “the discovered manuscript”, whereby a tale is presented as a manuscript (in this case – an audio recording) found and prepared for publication by other hands. In other words, fictional podcasts use various tools to presents themselves as non-fictional. The purpose is to give the story the pretense of authenticity, a condition for the listener to play-pretend with the possibility that the weird and dreadful events actually took place, making it possible for (or forcing) them to rethink the rules and structures of their world. Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry attribute this pseudo-documentary stylization to what they call a “post-*Serial* model of production” which can be summarized as “someone uncovers a supernatural conspiracy” (Hancock, McMurtry 2018: 82). The popularity of the true crime podcast *Serial* has resulted in “develop[ing] a new form of audio fiction based consciously within the podcast media form [...] represent[ing] the next movement in audio-fiction form” (Hancock, McMurtry 2018: 100). Pseudo-documentarism and post-*Serial* production represent self-conscious fiction but also the tendency to present fiction as real for the immersion and pleasure of the also self-conscious recipient<sup>3</sup>.

Fictional podcasts emulate non-fiction podcasts in order to establish their format and position within the podcast market in the same way that early literary fiction imitated non-fictional forms (letters, diaries etc.) to institute itself. The play-pretend of fictional podcast within a pseudo-documentary style also creates a particular relationship with its audience. It is possible to distinguish between two types of audience for pseudo-documentary podcasts: the implied audience within the fictional world who can engage with the podcast’s content by sending mails and audio-recordings (which was used by Pacific Northwest Stories) and the extra-diegetic audience who is – to a certain extent – forced to posit themselves as the implied audience (and who may also participate in play-pretend by engaging themselves by sending emails etc.). This can be done in the name of immersion and the listener’s pleasure. In the case of *I Am in Eskew*, however, the silent audience is positioned as one of the malevolent forces by the means of which Eskew oppresses its inhabitants.

In the beginning, David makes his recordings in the style of a travel podcast, presenting the various “attractions” of Eskew (the Commemoration Gallery etc.) and the everyday life in the city, which frame the horror as something of an oddity and provide the formal and emotional distance between the audience and the story. Within the context of the whole story it becomes clear that the format of the travel podcast has been just another form of David playing his role for Eskew – modifying his cry for help in the way that the city might allow. The first breakthrough in the relationship between David and the au-

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3 A similar tendency can be found within the “found footage” horror movies, popularized by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and brought back by the *Paranormal Activity* (2007) franchise. In that case we can also identify a broader movement within the contemporary horror where the fear comes from the fictional assurance of the extra-diegetic source of plotlines, to which we can also ascribe paranormal investigation such as the *Ghost Adventures* series (2008-present) and the phenomenon of analogue horror.

dience comes in episode 5, *Illumination*, which is the story of an old railway bridge that was “born as a ruin”. David – upon the listeners’ advice – has started seeing a psychiatrist and claims to “do a lot better now”. Of course, Eskew perverts every form of seeking help, as there is

[...] the second psychiatrist, the one who stands in the very corner of the room with his back turned to me, his extraordinarily long and moon-like face a silhouette against the darkness. Motionless as far as I can tell but forever emitting a scratchy and unpleasant sound, as if he’s writing with an old pen on rough paper [...] It’s as if there’s something buried in the darkness of his mouth and chin that’s making the noises for him. Something chitinous, and hairy, and itching.

Despite the effort to take care of his mental state, David becomes suicidal, which is inflected upon him by the city in the form of darkness below the bridge. David crosses the bridge every day on his walk to the work and the bridge has started affecting him, tempting him to jump into the darkness. The need to jump (and die) is presented as something external to David, as the city starts to message him to “jump” at every opportunity, through the words of co-workers and passers-by. At the end of episode, the messages from listeners also tell him to “jump” and David responds to it “I don’t know if you can hear me. If you can do anything other than take on shapes, and mimic, and distort”, treating the implied listeners as one of Eskew’s forces. The position of implied audience is the one of terror, a source of menace; David’s confessions are pointless as he cannot be heard by a friendly ear.

In episode 10 David asks directly “How long can you keep listening to this... and not help me?”, which takes the agency away from the extra-diegetic listeners, marking them as another example of uncaring, indifferent forces of the universe, as is the case with the implied audience. Just as Eskew wants to be witnessed (episode 7) in all its monstrous glory, we want to witness David’s suffering for our entertainment, meaning we are no better than Eskew, the city of horrors. David’s desperate cry for help is also highly relatable for anyone whose suffering stays unnoted, which is common in the case of a mental illness that does not display any physical signs to be seen by others. As a result, the existential horror of *I Am in Eskew* consists simultaneously in identifying with David’s suffering as a victim of cruel forces of the world and in being a cause of said suffering, as the audience becomes the implicit extension of the city’s forces. This double position corresponds with the double position of the self-conscious recipient of pseudo-documentary fiction, who at the same time, believes and does not in the “realism” of the presented fiction. In the case of *I Am in Eskew* to engage in play-pretend and believe in what is proposed in fiction is to accept our part in the fictional world’s cruelty.

### A Multi-Genre Horror Podcast

In episode 6 the character of Riyo Dual is introduced: a British-Somali former special agent of an unspecified government agency, known as the Gray Room, currently working as an investigator of some sort. She is hired by a single mother living in London to find her missing son, who disappeared three years ago. Soon we find out that the woman is Mrs. Ward, David's mother, and Riyo's task is not to find David, but to solve the mystery of a haunting that started to take place in Mrs. Ward's apartment a few weeks before. It is connected to the event from episode 4, where David recalled his mother and the strange rhyme she sang to him (A.A. Milne's poem *Disobedience*). Now Mrs. Ward can hear herself singing it as she did when David was a child. Soon Mrs. Ward is dead, eaten by the mold from David's old journals and Riyo is on her way to discover Eskew (episode 8). By episode 8 it becomes clear that David and Riyo's plots represent two different genres: paranormal/psychological horror and spy thriller with elements of urban fantasy, respectively. Riyo's approach is intellectual as she follows bits of information from the Gray Room that lead her to professor John Henley, who discusses the concept of hostile architecture as a form of weaponry aimed at the civil population (episode 12). With his help Riyo enters Eskew and finds David, hell-bound to destroy the city of nightmares (episode 21). David's perspective is an emotional one, as he lives through and experiences the nightmares of Eskew first-hand.

Riyo's narration is presented in the form of voice messages she leaves on her partner's telephone. The nameless man is also an agent, met in training with the Gray Room. At first it appears that he is away on a mission without any means of contacting her. Riyo speaks about the hope of meeting him by chance on an airport. Later we learn that he is dead and Riyo had received a formal notification about his death from the Gray Room but she cannot accept the reality of it. She is in denial and grieving, unable to perform the work of mourning so as to move on with her life. Not only is she haunted by the ghost of her past, but she also becomes like a ghost herself, which explains why she decided to work on Mrs. Ward's case of a strange visitation. She is drawn to Eskew by her mourning, hoping to find there a ghost she cannot live without. She is like a ghost herself, not in the sense of being undead but in that of being un-alive. Unlike David, she never abandons the narrative tools, consistently talking directly to her loved one, even when the narration does not supply her with the opportunity to make a phone call. Here the audience is positioned as eavesdropping, violating someone's privacy and hearing what is not meant for them. It is another form of aggravating the extra-diegetic audience and taking the agency away from them.

The third significant character in the podcast is Eskew itself, the city that "just wants to be witnessed" (episode 7). Riyo has made the same remark about the ghost, wondering "If the ghost wants nothing more than to be witnessed, why would it appear behind you, and not in front of you?" (episode 6). The

two statements correspond with each other, positioned closely in the series, marking Eskew as the ghost city, not in the sense of being destroyed or abandoned but in the sense of the city being a ghost itself, haunting its inhabitants. Eskew has its arc, it is anthropomorphized (has wants and needs) and personified, able to possess its inhabitants and speak through them. Throughout the course of events it becomes clear that the city romances David and provides him with perverted versions of his desires: to grant a love story (episode 1), friendship (episode 7), and family (episode 22), even a false sense of agency when he is appointed to bring Eskew's history to life (episode 23). At the same time, Eskew tries to expand beyond its borders into the "real world", destroying every hope of escaping the city and its nightmares. What Eskew wants is submission and acceptability in its terror. Therefore, the humanity of David, and later of Riyo, is at stake.

### Interpretations

The most pressing question here is what exactly Eskew is and what it represents. The story offers manifold answers and interpretations, depending which genre and mode of reception we choose to follow. On a literal level it is a fantasy horror story about a cursed city that tortures its entrapped residents by creating cityscapes full of monsters. The city arc stays inconclusive on this level, as the audience does not receive any explanation as to how Eskew came to be or what its expansion means for the fictional world. By the end of the series Eskew is at war with the rest of the world and it is winning. The emotional arcs of David and Riyo are resolved: David accepts his hope and lets go of the grief; Riyo accepts her loss and grieves her hope; they "carry on" with living even if they "carry Eskew on with [them]" (episode 30), although David's state of being is unclear while Riyo just drives out of the city (if there still is an "out of the city"). It seems that David overcomes his double – a monster created by the city – and by doing so, he falls into the darkness which, for him, is the only way of escaping the city: "climbing out of ruins of himself" (episode 30).

The most compelling element of this interpretation is the fact that Eskew is in love with David or, rather, that the relationship between Eskew and David can be described as an abusive codependence of an unhealthy love affair. This becomes clear in the first episode, which lays out the core conflict of *I Am in Eskew*: Eskew is courting David in a horrifying way, desiring his submission (understood as losing the sense of himself as Mrs. How and Mr. Why did it [episode 1]), punishing him when it is denied; David is unable to accept what the city has to offer, but at the same time he also desires it and despises it, and despises himself for wanting it. In first episode David is almost seduced by the city's vision of a grand love affair where the sense of oneself is no longer needed as in the relationship between Mr. How and Mrs. Why, a couple who exchange their names as a symbol "of their closeness [...] Their compatibility. For How and Why, there is no gender, there are no roles. They might as well be one another" (episode 1). For David, the monstrous love affair of How and

Why, complemented with chocolate boxes and flowers made of human flesh, is an “entire show [that] has been put on for my benefit and my participation” (episode 1). Yet, while he is tempted by the sight of How and Why – “its eyes are not level, since one eye is brown and set into the undulating flesh of two merged foreheads and the other eye is bright sapphire blue and protruding from a bulging throat that has conjoined with a second, paler throat” (episode 1) – it brings him to a heartbroken conclusion: “I can’t tell you how it feels, at that moment, to witness absolute beauty. But I can tell you that I find myself utterly lacking in my ability to accept it [...] Something was crafted for me, by this city, and [...] I didn’t have the strength to accept it” (episode 1).

As terrified as he is by Eskew, David is also unable to leave it and walk away, which is the source of tension in the podcast’s dramaturgy. David chooses Eskew over and over again: he walks into the city from London (episode 30); he leaves the safety of the burn unit in the hospital to go back into the city (episode 9); he kills the daughter that the city made for him, a child who sees the city nightmares instead of him (episode 22); he rejects Kenneth’s pleas for help in escaping the city (episode 13). Almost every episode ends with David choosing Eskew once again because it is the only place where his fears are justified and do not just consist in a creation of his neurotic mind. In some sense he is safe in Eskew because he can be sure that the city is as he sees it: monstrous and dangerous, a place where he is right to be afraid. Eskew is a manifestation of the symptoms of his mental illness and also an external source of reason why he feels like he is a broken shell of a man. Without Eskew, David would have to acknowledge his mental problems. In Eskew he is not suicidal; it is the cursed railway bridge that is forcing him to jump; his need for isolation is not an unhealthy inadequacy in the face of interpersonal relationship, it is self-defense against the monsters of the city. The true horror would be to feel that way in any other place than Eskew, where paranoia is not justified. Somehow, Eskew is a source of comfort. The true horror lies outside its borders.

It is clear that on a metaphorical level *I Am in Eskew* is a representation of mental illness and mental disorders. In this case, we follow David through his delusions as he isolates himself from people, develops paranoia and depression which lead him to suicidal tendencies (episode 5) and self-harm (episode 7). He is hospitalized (episode 9) and seemingly starts to feel better, even entering a relationship with Allegra (episode 10), and starting a new job in a corporation (episode 11). The stressful job and the possible death of his co-worker due to his own mental illness (episode 13), cause another breakdown and David becomes homeless (episode 16), wandering without help through the city until he sees Allegra again (episode 19). They start a family (episode 22) as David tries to once again get back on his feet, but their daughter dies and their relationships breaks up. The podcast ends with David’s suicidal jump from the window in the hotel (episode 30) but all these events are presented through the lens of supernatural horror genre, rendering the question ‘is it real or is

David just crazy?’ – unsubstantial. To some extent, the narration uses even disguised medical language: the phrase David says in many episodes, especially in the beginning – “My name is David Ward and I am in Eskew” – is a rephrase of the group therapy introduction: “My name is David Ward and I am mentally ill”; this also pertains to “My name is David Ward and I am doing a lot better now” (episode 10). Therefore, David’s narration resembles therapy session confessions. The podcast itself could be a therapy tool. We also know that David takes (or at least buys) risperidone, an atypical antipsychotic used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, which is casually mentioned (episode 2) among his other daily chores. The literal and metaphorical levels of interpretation are entangled and inseparable as they represent the reality of mental illness: Eskew is an externalization of David’s symptoms because that is how they are experienced by him – as something external from him. It illustrates the entanglement of cityscape and mindscape as well: the experience of the city is never separated from the state of observer’s mind.

### **The Askew Architecture: Eskew and Beyond**

Hostile architecture is an urban-design strategy that uses elements of public spaces to restrict physical behavior of people within them. It is a tool of prevention and exclusion that makes certain aspects of public spaces uncomfortable and impractical, it “guides behavior both physically and psychologically” (Chelley 2016: 18) by making certain people feel unwanted in public spaces, putting the “public” part of the term into question. Beside the infamous “anti-homeless” spikes, this also includes water sprinklers that become activated by movement but do not water anything; there being only cold water in public toilets; bolts on the front steps of buildings; locked up trash cans as well as surveillance cameras etc. The phenomenon of hostile architecture is symptomatic of the late capitalism as it does not solve any issues but only obscures the visual manifestation of problems created by capitalism itself, such as homelessness. It also reveals who is considered to be “undesirable” in contemporary society. The fact that hostile architecture also impacts other individuals (pregnant people, people with children, elderly, people with disabilities etc.) does not seem to be enough to renounce it. In that case it is possible to wonder to what extent inhabitants troubled by designs of hostile architecture in their everyday life are, in fact, also “undesirable” in the contemporary cityscapes or who exactly are the cityscapes made for? Which is to ask – who is the implied citizen here?

*I Am in Eskew* presents the concept of hostile architecture taken literally. Eskew is a city where “[t]he streets wind too far in on themselves, the stairs climb too high, and both buildings and inhabitants can act in peculiar, obsessive, or frightening ways” (Ware 2018), where it is places, not people, that are frightening (episode 1). The monsters of Eskew are born out of its architectural solutions. The hostile and dangerous space creates citizens corresponding to its own design. To live in an inhuman city is to become inhuman. Thus, an unspeakable truth about hostile architecture is revealed: the visible lack of

something (marked by spikes and other designed signs of unwelcoming) does not make it disappear but become non-present. It only works as a reminder of exclusion. Following the supernatural metaphor, the designs of hostile architecture work as tokens of performed exorcism, like a ring of salt that can be removed at any given moment, letting the unwelcome creatures in. In that sense, hostile architecture is a “designed paranoia” (Chellew 2016), an everlasting reminder of the dangers in contemporary society (such as social and class conflicts and tensions). Cara Chellew writes about the signs of hostile architecture, stating that “once you see it, it is impossible to stop noticing its use around the city” (Chellew 2016: 18), which can be also said about haunting as understood by Gordon (2008: xvi).

Even though the term “hostile architecture” appears in the podcast is episode 12, the concept itself is introduced as soon as in episode 2 in the form of the Commemoration Gallery: an impossible building, one of Eskew’s beautiful monstrosities. The “spiny and colossal temple that is the Commemoration Gallery” is positioned on the Hound’s Hill and is closed to the public as it remains unfinished. Its very name functions as a taboo in Eskew: “They all stare at me when I mention the gallery, as if I’ve got a word wrong in my translation. As if I’ve cited something that doesn’t exist in their reckoning of the city”. The Commemoration Gallery works as a representation of Eskew in microcosm: a vast, unfriendly space, where navigation “is an uncoiling” (episode 1).

Blank white floors bleeding into blank white walls into blank white ceilings. The lights above the gaping emptiness of the lobby, glowing and blazing, sending reflections out across the void in contorted shapes and shifting motions.

Perfect, at first, so perfect that you’re afraid to blemish it with your own shadow, your own echoing footsteps.

And then, gradually, it becomes overwhelming, dizzying in its absolute emptiness, a space and shape without anything to anchor you within it. Only the next frame of a doorway, and the next frame of a doorway, to prevent you from becoming lost in the void.

I stumble, and the architect catches me by the arm.

‘I know,’ he says, with a touch of pride to his voice. ‘It’s too much’ (episode 2).

It is an emptiness demanding to be filled. As glorious as it is horrifying, it could only be completed by something inhuman. But it is not static. The peculiar feature of the Commemoration Gallery is that it is ever changing, removing its rooms as one walks through them. It is the ultimate labyrinth where one cannot retain any sense of one’s location: “[...] it’s safe to walk here, so long as you keep to the corridors and the rooms that feed back into each other, like a living system. Don’t walk into a dead-end room, somewhere superfluous with just a single doorway that may cut you off unexpectedly, leaving you stranded

in an empty cell with four walls and no exit". The heart of Gallery, the only place that never changes, is a workroom full of blueprints: every plan for Commemoration Gallery ever made and more of them arriving every day because whatever is wrong with the Gallery "is still spreading, still multiplying". And as the Daedalus labyrinth – the archetype for hostile architecture – the Commemoration Gallery has its monster, wandering through the different plans of this place, waiting to devour lost ones. As the labyrinth and the Minotaur become one, so the Commemoration Gallery and Eskew become their own monsters, a predator preying on its inhabitants.

The Commemoration Gallery is a city image out of a nightmare: an illegible space of total disorientation (Lynch 1990: 2), actively working on trapping passers-by. A blueprint cannot serve as a map as one would not be able to predict which version of the Gallery they are in and there are too many blueprints to be useful. As Lynch notices, the most important part of a positive city image is its legibility, the possibility of recognizing space and one's location within it. This may be done with tools such as maps, street numbers or familiar sights, "[t]he need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual" (1990: 4). "But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word 'lost' in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster" (1990: 4). To be in Eskew is to be lost and to have lost. Maps have no use in Eskew: "Open one up, and you may find yourself entirely lost. Staring in wonder at roads and squares that do not exist, and bear no relation to the signs and crossings before you" (episode 3). The lost sense of orientation occurs simultaneously with the loss of the self, the disintegration of one's personhood that leads to the total submission so desired by Eskew. To be lost is to be at Eskew's mercy.

### **Hostile Architecture as Narration and Narration as Hostile Architecture**

Architecture has certain narrative qualities. The metaphor of "reading the city" is well established in social and cultural studies, referring to how a city is perceived, understood and interpreted by its inhabitants. *I Am in Eskew* presents the city as a living organism, an entity which engages in monstrous relationships with its citizens. In other words, when one reads Eskew, Eskew reads them back. The omniscient nature of Eskew can be understood as standing for the representation of surveillance in contemporary cities, the unspoken knowledge that a city stores information about us, knows more about us than we are comfortable sharing. But, more importantly, it complicates the metaphor of "reading the city" by signaling that it is a mutual relationship. Just as we have an opinion of the "city", so it has its opinion about us and the hostile architecture is a way of expressing it, to let us know how the city "wants" us to behave, what to do, how to interact with it and with each other. Eskew, a city

employing hostile architecture, writes the story for its inhabitants in the form of restrictions, orders and rules by a series of structures that constrain our actions, determine our choices, predict outcomes with an alarming accuracy. Our cities are not passive spaces to be read but active entities controlling our lives in order to “discipline us into primarily consumption based modes of interacting with and in the city” (Smith, Walters 2018: 1), to constrain the freedom of movement, to take the agency away from us and to sustain the *status quo* of exclusion. Therefore, hostile architecture is a form of narration, a way of telling the story of the city, wherein the city is an active character with agency. However, this agency is gained at the expense of the citizens. Hostile architecture creates an explicit form of the implied citizen, an analogous structure to the implied reader, the embodiment of how a text structures response. An implied citizen is an obedient one, preferably one who does not see the signs of exclusion or who actively participates in discriminatory practices by the power of their capital, social class and identity that assures admittance to public spaces “in both construction and access” (Smith, Walters 2018: 3).

Moreover, *I Am in Eskew* presents narration as a form of hostile architecture in the sense that narration is a tool of isolation, restriction and control. Depending on who “holds the pen”, a story can give or take away the agency of a certain group of people. Much as hostile architecture, narration is an unfeeling structure. Eskew gives David the lines he does not want to say and a role he does not want to play; he survives by bowing when city wants him to bow (episode 20). What David wants is not to be a part of the story of Eskew. Instead, the city assigns him to become its herald and the “celebrity victim” of Eskew (episode 27). Even though David refuses to become what Eskew wants him to be, the podcast itself constitutes exactly what Eskew wanted David to do: “Speak of your trauma, and your pain, and the hidden things that lurk in every street and every face...and be understood [...] Be the brave man who warns humankind of the invisible threat massing upon the threshold, consulted by governments, examined by scientists, the one voice of unpalatable truth” (episode 27). Therefore, the podcast reflects the soundscape of Eskew, becoming a tool of satisfying the city’s need to be witnessed, presented and perpetuated. By listening to *I Am in Eskew* extra-diegetic audience arrives in the city and the podcast’s title refers to David’s state as well as ours as we contribute to Eskew’s extension by listening.

There is no escape from Eskew and there is no escape from various deterministic social, class, geopolitical etc. forces that shape our biographies as a form of narration. The spatial horror of Eskew is a metaphor of social and cultural infrastructure of late capitalism, incapable of sustaining human life without destroying or perverting it into an acceptable form of a predestinated social role. This is highlighted in Kenneth’s arc as “he embroidered his existing lies, creating this scenario with his wife and daughters turning murderous to try and draw me out, and he kept pushing it harder and harder, hoping to force me to admit the truth about my life here” (episode 13). But Eskew deliv-

ers, and by the end of the episode, David “can sense him trying to mouth the syllables of a horror which he invented, and which Eskew faithfully brought to life” (episode 13). Kenneth tells his sad and terrifying story in the hope of hiding and escaping, but, instead, the city materializes it. Kenneth’s story was one of a perfect citizen of Eskew, haunted and afraid and, as invented by him, was a form of agency: something he told about himself before others wrote his story for him. Eskew used the same story to take the agency away from him, making him a prophet of his own doom. Kenneth’s arc showcases how narration can become a trap, even if it is our own creation. It demonstrates how Eskew – a hostile city – will not be satisfied with mock submission but will demand a real one instead.

Another archetype of hostile architecture could be a haunted house, the classical horror venue that inspired Ware: “the idea that certain places can simply go wrong – and once these bad environments have been established and ostracized by society, they can’t be exorcised. They simply keep accruing power through the individual stories that play tragically out in their shadow” (Ware 2018). The curse of a haunted house is what causes its inhabitants to repeat the mistakes of previous generations. The haunted house is a cycle of repetition, re-living past tragedies and sustaining the environment that caused them. It serves as a narrative structure of human suffering as much as a spatial pattern of human environment.

### **Production of Future Ghosts**

Hauntology uses the metaphors of ghost and haunting to describe the return or persistence of certain elements from our cultural or social past. We create our ghost through the sin of omission, forgetfulness and deletion. To not reckon with past is to create a ghost and the return of the dead is the return of the repressed. But contemporary culture and society also produce repression and hostile architecture is an example thereof. The “unwanted” are pushed outside of what Henri Lefebvre calls the “representation of space”: city space conceptualized by planners and social engineers (1991: 39). His concept of the spatial practice, the representation of space and the representational space could be interpreted as the Id, Ego and Superego of the city, respectively, if we follow Eskew’s notion to treat the city as a living organism with its own agency. The “unwanted” (homeless people, youth, poor people and minorities) exist in the spatial practice of the city but are repressed in the representation of space by hostile architecture. As repression – and, therefore – as a defense mechanism, hostile architecture ensures that the visual signs of capitalism’s crimes (dispossessed people) will not be seen in the representation of space, the conscious part of the city. But the signs of repression itself remain in the form of spikes, inconvenience and the impractical use of space. The “unwanted” are non-present, physically removed but ever-present in the cityscape due to the signs of their exclusion. They become contemporary ghosts, haunting the city as an unspoken threat, in the same way as a spectre in a haunted house works as a reminder of past sins.

Eskew itself is a city of the “unwanted”, people who do not fit into society. Allegra describes her experience before Eskew through the reaction she got from people as they “despise you for your strangeness, your coldness, your lack of ease in any place or amongst any people” (episode 14). David talks about his relationship with his mother as she was “[f]rightened for me, because in such a neurotic, lonely, unhappy child there could be no great success in the life to come” (episode 30). Allegra and David were predestined to come to Eskew due to their unfitness into society. They were the ghosts of the contemporary world, unable to succeed in life. The same pertains to Riyo, a person homeless, because for her a “home” is not a place but a person who is lost. For her, Eskew is the city of ghosts and death, a place strangely fitting her current mental state and that is why she seeks it. When Riyo describes the state of Mrs. Ward – “She doesn’t want this problem solved. She wants to carry on living with these ghosts, these sudden and inexplicable visitations. Because if she exists in a world where nothing is certain and probability plays no part... then she may yet look up from her casserole one night and see her son, standing in her kitchen doorway again” (episode 6) – she is talking about herself. Eskew welcomes her when she admits that she is haunted and lost (episode 21).

Riyo brings the notion of hauntology (episode 6) into *I Am in Eskew* as well as introduces the concept of hostile architecture (episode 12), giving the audience terms and words to describe David’s experience. By the time Riyo appears in narration we already know that Eskew wants to be witnessed but it is Riyo who recognizes this need as the quality of a ghost, simultaneously expressing something that could be a credo of hauntology: “If the ghost wants nothing more than to be witnessed, why would it appear behind you, and not in front of you? The only answer I can think of is this: it appears behind you because it already knows, to an absolute certainty, that you will have no choice but look back” (episode 6).

In hauntology, a reckoning with ghosts – looking back at them – is inevitable as it is the only method of fixing the social, cultural and psychological problems and tensions. *I Am in Eskew* expands hauntology with the message “don’t wait for our problems to become future ghosts; treat them as such now”. The position of the implied reader gives the audience the choice to look – to witness – Eskew and suffering it causes much like hostile architecture in contemporary cities leaves us with no choice but to notice it as a sign of exclusion and discrimination.

### **Conclusions: We Are in Eskew**

The soundscape of *I Am in Eskew* produces a mindscape for the listener: by becoming their auditory field, it draws them into the city of terrors. So does the narration: by the end David does not need to assure us that we will be in Eskew because we already are in the city – as its part or as its victims. The expansion of Eskew is an unsolved plot point because it has already happened: we are in Eskew since Eskew is all that is left in contemporary, capitalist so-

ciety. The Orion Building Concern, which brought Eskew to life, exists inside and outside of Eskew to underline the unstable nature of the city border. What created Eskew lies outside of it, marking Eskew as a symptom of broader social problems. It proves the podcast's capability to create an immersive horror story that makes it possible for the audience to perceive fiction as an extension of the real world.

The soundscape of the podcast contains the cityscape of Eskew which provides the listeners with tools to create a mindscape, a way of seeing and experiencing the world within the framework of hauntology. *Eskew* gives audience interpretative tools to deconstruct their personal experience of city spaces, to see the unseen and recognize the contemporary ghost of the dispossessed. It recognizes hostile architecture as a process of taking away agency from citizens and presents it in David's arc. A mindscape here is the personal experience of the contemporary urban environment – meaning a hostile, haunted space and an active agent imposing rules and restrictions on its inhabitants in the name of inhuman market forces. *I Am in Eskew* makes it clear that we are, indeed, in Eskew, a city of horrors.

*I Am in Eskew* epitomizes many tendencies of contemporary podcast culture, including an experimental use of the medium, overtones of counter-culture and a critique of capitalist market and society. It is also an important representation of mental illness as it makes it possible for the audience to not only acknowledge it but also experience the reality thereof through the supernatural metaphors treated literally.

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