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Rent: prostitution and the Irish Apartment Block

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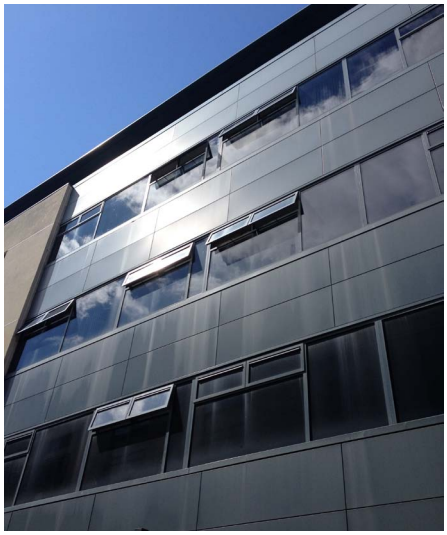
In 1974, pursuing his interest into the infra-ordinary – 'the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the back-ground noise, the habitual' – Georges Perec wrote about an idea for a novel:

> 'I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed ... so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible'.

Borrowing methods from Perec to move somewhere between conjecture, analysis and documentation, this paper interrogates the late twentieth-century speculative apartment block and its position within the city of Dublin in particular. Apartment comes from the Italian appartare meaning 'to separate'. The space of the boundary between activities is reduced to a series of intimately thin lines: the depth of a floor, a party wall, a window, the convex peep-hole in a door, or the façade that Perec seeks to render invisible. The apartness of the apartment is accelerated when aligned with short-term tenancies: the paper will pay particular attention to the impact this real estate separation and location has had on practices of prostitution that are now supported by online 'retailing'.

It is a building like many others, an apartment block built in the late twentieth-century, with a commercial ground floor, basement car-parking and above street level, five storeys of domestic accommodation. It is located within a kilometre of the general post office, the designated centre of this provincial Irish city, in a site in a lane once occupied by a garage. The block was designed as part of a larger scheme and stretches with its service court/car park across the former garage's curtilage to front another street – this time a busy thoroughfare – with a larger commercial premises, a bank.



The planning drawings submitted to the local council show that the block contains thirty-six apartments, nine per floor, made up of one studio unit, five one bedroom units and three two bedroom units. These are accessed by two stair cores at either end of the building (one entered from the street and one from the rear courtyard/car-park) and a central, double-loaded corridor which, excepting the two end units, renders each apartment single-aspect – either courtyard facing or street facing. Of the creamish-coloured street façade, the profusion of expansion joints make it look as though it has been systemically assembled from pre-fabricated concrete panels. In fact, it consists of a concrete block cavity wall whose smooth render has been indented with seemingly random trowel cuts. There are also organic degradations, the black staining of water-damage from misfiring sills and patches of grey-green mould. Other, designed articulations on the façade include plastic weep-holes; shallow, circular ventilation ducts; and occasionally, the more forceful outward thrust of some retro-fitted ventilation system that must belie a generic fault, as it pokes itself abruptly through every unit's exterior wall. The apartments at the two extremities of the block have balconies of approximately 2 x 1.5 metres, pushed back into the building. The rest of the balconies (twenty-four in number, front and back) are bolted on.

In the two bedroomed apartment nearest the stair-core on the street-side, the floor to ceiling glazed window of the living room was a mere 6.2 metres from my office. From 2008 to 2012, operating in an irregular temporal pattern of periods of absence of weeks or even months, a sex-worker occupied this apartment, often sitting at the window in the time in between her clients. When she was working, she closed the curtains. In 2012, a series of counter-prostitution measures was launched across the island of Ireland, initiated jointly by the police authorities of its two jurisdictions. Of the hundred or so so-called brothels raided, most were in domestic premises with a significant proportion in apartment blocks.

Until the economic boom beginning in the decade before the millennium, the apartment block was a minor architectural typology in the built environment of Ireland. In 1905, the journal the Irish Builder described the newly completed Earlsfort Mansions the 'solitary example of the residential flat in Dublin for people of means'[1]. For much of the nineteenth

[1] McManus, R. 'Suburban and urban housing in the twentieth century in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy. Vol. 111C, 2011: 253-286).

and twentieth century, the idea of living in multiple occupancy dwellings was associated with the hardship and penury of working class life. This was epitomised by the slums found on the north side of the city of Dublin. Here, a high density of occupation was realised not through the construction of new buildings but by the appropriation of existing 18th and 19th-century fabric. These former town-houses of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy were subdivided into multiple units, sometimes containing just one room. The association of this area with poverty was paralleled by the reputation of a small section of it – called the Monto – as an area of vice and prostitution. James Joyce characterised it as 'Nighttown' in *Ulysses*. In the 1940s the area's nemesis, a Catholic reformer named Frank Duff, wrote a series of retrospective exposés on the area for the journal of the Legion of Mary. Both writer and reformer defined the Monto similarly as a space of inversions – night instead of day, feminine in contrast to masculine, etc. They also described its spatial characteristics in terms of the uncanny, tracing moments of appropriation where original purposes gave way to other uses, where domestics buildings became porous and public and private space intertwined. Ground floor hallways often became shortcuts between parallel streets, opening up a myriad of route-ways so that edges of private space did not begin at the front door of a house but instead blocks of tenements became publically penetrable[2]. Joyce's

[2] Boyd, G. A. *Dublin 1745-1922: Hospitals, Spectacle and Vice*. (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006)

description of 'flimsy houses with gaping doors'[3] simultaneously sexualised these distortions and mapped them on to architectural details, implying that the availability of intercourse was both emblematised within and realised through elements of threshold in the built fabric. Duff was similarly interested in these elements. He described ordinary doors in shabby streets as unexpectedly opening up into magnificent and opulent rooms, 'a whirlwind of life ... a horrible glamour' which often imitated the decorative trends of Parisian brothels.[4]

Whatever the veracity of these descriptions, anxiety about the apparent spatial and social ambiguities of communal working class life continued long after the activities of the Monto and other such areas had been extinguished. In the 1930s, in the debates surrounding the development of suitable social housing types, the Catholic Church in Ireland denounced apartment blocks as 'vehicles of immorality'. Apart from a small number of luxury examples built mainly on the south-side of Dublin in the 1960s and 70s, the private apartment block did not emerge in any numbers until the property boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s.[5,6] Until about the same period, prostitution in the capital and other urban areas had established itself mainly as an ephemeral, street-based practice, latterly dependent on visual (rather that verbal or tactile) soliciting and the use of the motorcar. This essay begins to consider some of the cultural and spatial factors that have articulated a coincidence between the architecture of the apartment block and a contemporary practice of prostitution in Ireland. It oscillates between subjective and particular perspectives to broader territories and contexts, seeking other historic moments where the apartment building has been forensically examined and connected to issues of gender, commodification and the ambiguities between private and public space. Accordingly, the essay involves the paradigm of Paris where the 19th-century city was built under similar conditions of financial speculation. New types of urbanity and the development of the apartment block here realised new spaces of sexual practices and transaction. The writings of George Perec as well as the techniques – shared with Walter Benjamin as well as Duff and Joyce – of micro-examining the codified material culture of everyday space, become part of a sensibility towards an urban blind spot and a negotiation between subjective physical, empirical and theoretical readings.

Writing in 1974, in a essay entitled 'Species of Spaces', Perec explored a series of nestling, overlapping scales of occupation and representation. These moved from the physical intimacy of the written page to the scope of the world before resting, in its terminal pages, on a series of unaffiliated meditations entitled 'space'. Towards the mid-point of the essay, in the section entitled, 'The Apartment Building', the author sketched out an idea for a novel:

3 Joyce. J. *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1922/1960).

4 Duff, F. in *Maria Legionis: The Organ of the Legion of Mary*. (Dublin, 1939)

5 McManus, R. (2011) op.cit.

6 Prunty, J. 'Residential urban renewal schemes, Dublin 1986-1994', in *Irish Geography* 28(2). 1995: 131-149.

> 'I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed ... so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible' (Perec 1974: 40).

Life A User's Manual (1978) is the consummation of this précis.[7] Here, Perec negotiates and measures patterns of existence within a single apartment block, room by room. He does this with an archaeological sensibility that sifts through activity and décor, structure and history, services and emotion, the personal and the mechanical, ascribing commensurate value to each. Narrative and space become enmeshed as the boundaries between background and action dissolve and time collapses. Rooms suffer another loss, that of hierarchy, to be filled almost indiscriminately with the presence of intangible histories, memories or, equally, with endless details about stuff, often in the form of lists: lists about the contents of the rooms, shopping lists, lists of items from catalogues, extracted from adverts, lists that incorporate lists from elsewhere in the novel. Like Daniel Spoerri's exposure of the fecundity of connections inherent in the everyday clutter of ordinary used objects in *The Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1962), Perec proceeds with the forensic method of a detective.

It is apt Perec's apartment block is located in Paris as it is here that the building type emerged in its modern form. The revolutions in spatial relations that defined Paris's pre-eminent position as the modern city were realised through a hidden landscape of financial speculation, the acceleration of forms of commodification into all aspects of social life, and the liberalisation of credit. Not only did the apartment become the most typical unit of domesticity within the city, it was also the site of the most intense financial speculations as members of a broad ranges of social classes – especially in the Second Empire from 1848 to 1871, the period of Hausmannisation – sought to profit from the transformation of the city.

As Perec and others have proposed, the apartment block is neither entirely public nor private but belongs to both. A container for the most intimate of activities, it is simultaneously the repeating motif of the new city, the delineator and decoration of the new boulevard, a key aspect in a culture of heightened visuality. According to Sharon Marcus (1999), the public spectacle of the 19th-century Parisian boulevard became absorbed by the porous facades of the apartment block through a quality of transparency that was both real and idealised.[8] As Diana Periton has pointed out, architectural drawings and pattern books of the city at this time often stressed design qualities through the medium of the cross-section. These emphasised the connections between domestic space and the street as well as the simultaneity of lives lived in apartment buildings. This was often seen as a revelatory device, a means of scrutinising and tracing the 'inner secrets' of otherwise hidden domestic spaces, 'with our finger and our

7 Perec, G. *Life a User's Manual* (trans. Georges Bellos, London: Vintage 1978/2003).

8 Marcus, S. *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

eyes'. The delineation of such drawings as a 'coupe anatomique' begins to conflate the building with the bodies it contains.[9] This found an echo in literary accounts. Jules Janin's updated version of an eighteenth-century fictional character named Asmodeus originally removed roofs to peer into houses before beginning in the 1840s – in a prototypical Perecquian method – to remove entire facades. The section of the apartment block and the activities found there become a synecdoche for Paris itself.

Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* echoes *Life: A User's Manual* in its attempts to decode an urban system. The collecting and collating of fragments of found cultural, commercial and technological phenomena is paralleled by meditations on the meanings of their interconnectedness. Arranged in a series of thematic sections called 'convolutes', the fifteenth of the series ('Convolute O') is occupied by two particular activities which played an important role in the development of the spatial culture of 19th-century Paris: prostitution and gambling. Already conflating the commercial or financial aspects of these speculative practices, Benjamin's convolute also begins to make connections across scales and with other economic activities – echoing the observations of Duff and Joyce – from the female body to architecture, specifically, the rented building.

> 'You see ... in Paris there are two types of women, just as there are two kinds of houses ...: the bourgeois house, where one lives only after signing a lease, and the rooming house, where one lives by the month ... How are they to be distinguished? ... by the sign ... Now the outfit is the sign of the female ... and there are outfits of such eloquence that it is absolutely as if you could read on the second floor if the advertisement, "Furnished apartment to Let"!'.[10]

The material qualities of these spaces is also explored, as the layered transparencies of the apartment façade are transposed – in descriptions of masks, make-up, cross-dressing and fashion – once again on to the body of the prostitute.

> 'As I was wandering in the vicinity of the Pont Neuf, a heavily made-up prostitute accosted me. She had on a light muslin dress that was tucked up to the knee and that clearly displayed the red silk drawers covering thigh and belly' [11]

For Marcus, the associations between the female body and built form formed a reciprocal relationship which operated over a series of urban scales. Entire neighbourhoods were delineated according to the type

9 Periton, D. 'The 'Coupe Anatomique': sections through the nineteenth-century Parisian apartment block', in *The Journal of Architecture*, 9:3, 2007: 289-304.

10 Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999).

11 Ibid

of women working or living there, while women themselves acquired identities associated with particular urban areas. Lorettes – a specific class of demi-mondaine – for example, were named after the church of Notre Dame de Lorette in the northern half of the city. But it was the generic and universal form of the apartment block which distilled and concentrated these associations. The buildings themselves became feminised, '"girls of stone" [whose] faults could be covered up just as a "an old coquette" would conceal her wrinkles [and where] 'for rent' signs ... would "glitter like a courtesan's ardent eyes"'.[12] The apartment was both vehicle and symbol of an accelerating culture of commodification where the pursuit of profit involved the increasing commercialisation of social life and temporary appropriations of both domestic and bodily spaces: Paris, as Emile Zola's novel *Nana* (1880) implies, was a city of speculation, exchange and other intimate desires.[13]

Whatever the original triggers of Ireland's so-called economic miracle were, it quickly became about the buying and selling of property. Some of its origins can be seen in Charles Haughey's decision in the 1980s to adopt Margaret Thatcher's housing policy and convert much of the publically-owned housing stock into exchangeable commodities. This was ultimately linked to a process of urban renewal and regeneration where, in place of blight, it was suggested that thriving inner city populations could be realised through the provision of high-density apartment and, latterly, mixed-use buildings. These were encouraged by generous tax-incentives, supported by vigorous marketing campaigns propounding the benefits of inner-city living and further legitimised by a reappraisal of the importance of 'context' and 'place' within planning and architectural discourses. The phenomenon which saw the empty spaces of the island's town and cities – gap-sites, brown and green field sites, the gardens of large houses, river banks, the conventual lands of religious orders, docklands and other ex-infrastructural landscapes – transformed into speculative housing schemes, lasted until the property bubble burst in 2008.

Constructed under conditions of intense financial speculation and high land prices, apartment blocks were often built as densely and cheaply as possible. Accordingly, formulaic design strategies were refined to realise maximum financial return from any site. 16.2 metre wide blocks with concrete cross-walls, for example, placed 22 metres apart with 3.8 metres for fire access. Apartments were often arranged in fours around circulation cores, with windowless pod bathrooms and kitchens located in the middle of the plan, and so on.[14] The predominance, especially during the 1990s, of apartment construction in 'designated areas' of urban blight often meant the creation of tenuously-linked archipelagos where isolated examples of this building type were surrounded by other land-uses and forms of housing. Writing about Dublin in this period, Jacinta Prunty discussed the inevitability of gentrification as higher-earning incomers lived in close proximity to deprived areas and impoverished communities.[15] She joined

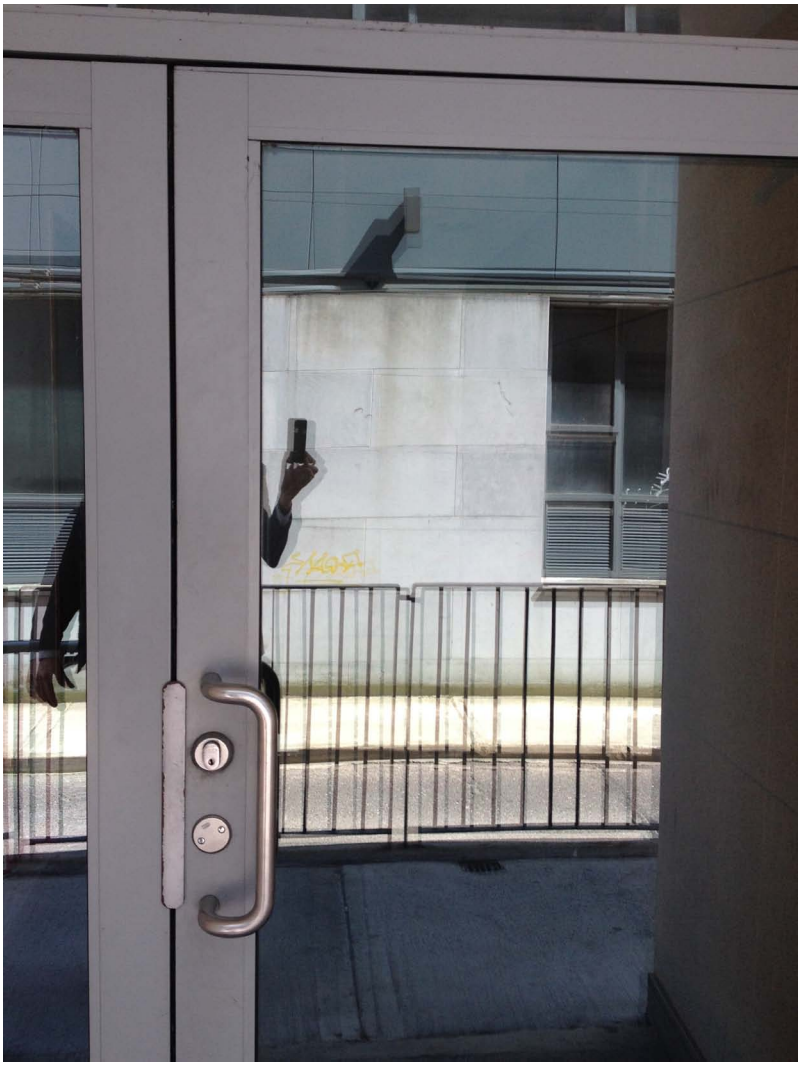
[12] Marcus, S. op.cit.

[13] Zola, E. *Nana* (trans. Douglas Parmée. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1880/2009).

[14] Pike, M. (under the pseudonym of Liam O'Flynn) 'Recipe No. 23 Maximum profit apartment scheme' in Boyd, G. A. (ed.) *building material 14: building boom and bust* (Dublin: Architectural Association of Ireland. 2005: 26-28).

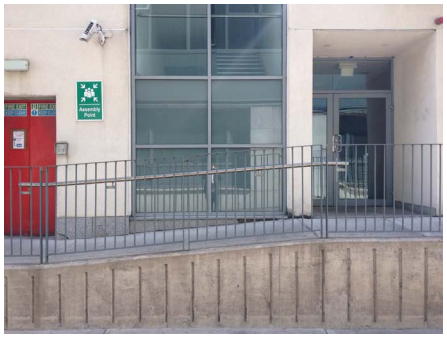
[15] Prunty, J. op.cit.

others such as Neil Smith in arguing that this juxtaposition of wealth and building type resulted in an architecture of enclaves, of securitisation and observation, of gates and cameras, physical and electronic thresholds and sequences of controlled areas.



The etymology of the word apartment in the Italian appartare, meaning to separate, seems particularly apt in descriptions of many of these speculative apartment blocks, including the one opposite my office window. Non-rentable areas such as staircases and corridors were restrained to an absolute minimum while boundaries between contiguous spaces and zones were reduced to a series of intimately, yet decisively separating, thin lines: the depth of a floor, a concrete party wall, a window, the façade, or the convex peep-hole in a door. Other deprivations such as single-aspect flats with little or no outside space led such typolologies to be seen as ersatz forms of sub-standard domesticity, offering no more than temporary accommodation and only then for narrow sections of society with little other choices. In *Life A User's Manual*, the author traces the

apartment block's social and spatial narratives over extended periods of time. In the late twentieth-century Irish version, the predominance of short-term leases meant that these long-spanning durations were largely absent. Perec's networks of relationships realised through the habitual and prolonged use of space were replaced by the transactions of temporary populations. Conditions of anonymity emerged.



Irene Cieraad has written on the shifting position and meaning of the window in Dutch society. Depicted frequently over the centuries in visual culture, she argues that the Dutch domestic window, as a filter between public and private space, was a specifically female site, one which both facilitated and expressed women's acts of labour and their control over the household, as well as symbolizing aspects of character: virtue or, during the twentieth century, often vice.[16] The latter refers to the practice of soliciting through the display of the female body within the window of brothels which were often sited in formerly domestic dwellings. Occupying the threshold, partaking in both the private and the public in a space which is both commercial and domestic, can be seen an act of transgression which immediately confers a specific social identity: the prostitute or, to use 19th-century nomenclature, the public woman. Such vitrine appearances were linked to the government regulation of prostitution in 20th-century Dutch society and a legislative desire to render it identifiable and visible within the urban condition. In *Warped Space*, Anthony Vidler describes another example of this in his discussion of 'Le signe', a short story by Guy de Montpassant published in 1886. It involves the pervasive phenomena of faire la fenêtre, an act of sexual solicitation effected in 19th-century Paris, where a woman communicated her availability to men on the street through a series of codified gestures and signs conducted from an upstairs window. Vidler describes how Sigmund Freud invoked the essay to conflate the loss of virtue with the element of the window as an explanation for the phenomenon of female agoraphobia.[17]

Yet the woman who often occupied the window of the apartment opposite my office was rarely if ever in direct visual contact with the street. The mechanics of prostitution in 20th-century Ireland have, like elsewhere, shifted over time according to culture, legislation and

16 Cieraad, I. 'Dutch Windows: Female Virtue and Female Vice' in Cieraad, I. (ed.) *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

17 Vidler, A. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

ultimately technology. Never acquiring the de-criminalised legitimacy of the Netherlands and its tendency towards stabilitas loci, in Ireland the practice of soliciting tended to involve the temporary, most often nocturnal, appropriation of public spaces – the occupation of expedient landscapes whose forms conformed or could be adapted to certain functional criteria. The tactile and verbal street solicitations of the 19th and early 20th-centuries on street-corners and other central urban sites – experienced by Duff and Joyce – were superseded by the mainly optical practice of kerb-crawling effected by the use of the motorcar. The latter appropriated more open, liminal zones often at the edges of inner cities along pieces of infrastructure like canals whose length facilitated and the gaze of headlights. By the late twentieth century, just as the economic boom in Ireland was developing a upsurge in the practice of prostitution, another series of conditions emerged which would re-make its landscape. Anti-prostitution legislation in 1993 contributed to the removal of much of the practice from the street just as the development of the internet and the mobile phone ensured that a public presence was no longer necessary. The anonymity and securitisation of space found in the apartment block offered the final condition.

The woman who sat at the window of the apartment opposite my office was not soliciting. Instead, this practice was carried out through both an electronic and a physical landscape: the use of web-sites and other social media and then the apartment block and its relationship to public space. For her, to a certain extent, and unlike the asymmetry of street-walking, some control could be exercised over this landscape. There were opportunities to filter and choose clients remotely and survey them they passed through the layers of buzzers, doorbells, peepholes and curtains that interrupted the route from street to apartment. For other sex-workers in apartments this would not necessarily be the case.[18]

[18] Whether this could potentially represent a safer environment for the sex-worker is debatable and dependent on many factors. The media coverage surrounding Operation Quest stressed the abuses, exploitations and instances of human trafficking uncovered in the hidden spaces of brothels within apartments and houses in Ireland. Conversely, some prostitutes' advocacy groups have suggested that some of the raided 'brothels' were merely the dwellings of co-habiting sex-workers.

Running parallel to the school of architecture, the long façade of the apartment building allowed glimpses of everyday and unguarded domesticity. For most of the time, during the day, its large windows framed empty scenes. Any disruptions in this pattern were, therefore, conspicuous. The figure by the window smoking cigarettes, taking phone-calls and watching television, interrupted only by periodic closures of the curtains – this series of ephemeral minutiae occupying time, equipment and space began to reveal a specific meaning in use within an otherwise generic block. None of this was visible from the street.

Much of the geography of prostitution in Ireland is no longer legible in the way that described by Duff or Joyce in the early 20th century, or by Benjamin in Paris. Nor it is in the liminal landscapes associated with more recent kerb-crawling. These represented centralised iterations of a public practice that had specific spatial characteristics that Perec would recognise. Spaces in the city that had become known through and by their habitual, prolonged and in some cases historical use as sites of soliciting. At its most intense in Dublin and Paris, these associations ingrained themselves into built fabric as neighbourhoods, buildings and architectural elements such as the door or more particularly, the window became emblematic of the selling of sex. As it is no longer necessary for the body of the sex-worker to physically occupy the street to solicit, these market places are disappearing, replaced by a practice mediated electronically and housed privately. Leaving few public traces, the new geography of prostitution in Ireland is fragmented and dispersed vertically throughout the city. If a map of this were to be drawn, it would no longer coincide with areas of social deprivation or follow lines of infrastructure. Instead, it would correspondence with the flow of capital that spanned the millennium and reshaped extensive parts of Irish cities and especially Dublin. This abstract landscape of financial speculation became concrete in the apartment block where an accelerated commodification of space overlaps with the commodification of bodies. Within these parameters, however, prostitution can exist almost anywhere. The practice has detached itself from spatial and material signifiers and its presence is only very imprecisely codified within the architecture of the apartment block, or revealed fleetingly to other, equally private realms nestled in the section of the city.