Ted's House

Leila Taylor

> "If architecture is the art of enclosing space for a purpose, Kaczynski's house warns us not to seek that space, not to go inside, not to be too curious for what is or was within."
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> — Richard Ford, "Evil's Humble Home." *New York Times Magazine*, 1998

In E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *The Cremona Violin*, the narrator begins "Councillor Krespel was one of the strangest, oddest men I ever met within my life." Krespel, the eccentric diplomat/polymath/violin maker, is obsessive about all things, and music in particular. He collects rare violins, but only plays them once before breaking them apart to figure out how they're made. His daughter Antonia sings with such sublime beauty that he's compelled to lock her away, forbidding her to sing for anyone other than himself. However, our introduction to Krespel is not through music but through architecture and his very unusual approach to designing his house. Instead of a floor-plan, Krespel draws a square-shaped trench in the ground and tells his builders, "Here's where you must lay the foundations; then carry up the walls until I say they are high enough." They think it's a bit weird, but he's filling them up with food and booze, so they don't question their boss's methodology. Once the walls are up, he peruses their work, "... running his sharp nose hard against the wall, he cried, "Come here, come here, men! Break me a door in here! Here's where I want a door made!"

Once inside, he walks through the space, the bricklayers behind him with hammers and picks at the ready wherever he cries, "Make a window here, six feet high by four feet broad! There, a little window, three feet by two!" Driven by some instinctual urge, he directs his workers to knock out windows wherever it feels right. On the outside it may look irrational, but "the interior arrangements suggested a peculiar feeling of comfort." Krespel's house is as unique and specific to him as a fingerprint. It's a house designed from the inside out, its windows positioned for one person's singular point of view.

The windows of the Unabomber cabin bother me. So does the door. It seems proportionately a bit too tall for its width, like a mathematically correct dimension based on the Golden Rule or Fibonacci sequence or some other classical theorem, but it doesn't look right. There's no window in the back. There's a small square window on each side, one in a place you would expect a window to be, the other positioned right underneath the eave, right up to near the top. It's awkward and too high. One window is right above the desk with a view of the access road. The other view reveals just the sky. The windows are small, meant for only one head at a time, on the inside, looking out. They are windows for someone who doesn't particularly need a lot of sunlight, or who doesn't want people looking in. It's as if someone sat down at the desk, in front of the typewriter, and like Krespel, traced a square on the wood in front of him and punched out a window. I can't speculate as to how much thought he gave to how many windows he would have and where they should be. I don't think aesthetics were his primary concern in the creation of his cabin, but there is an obsessive precision

about its silhouette that I find disturbing for reasons I'm not exactly sure of. It's just a feeling.

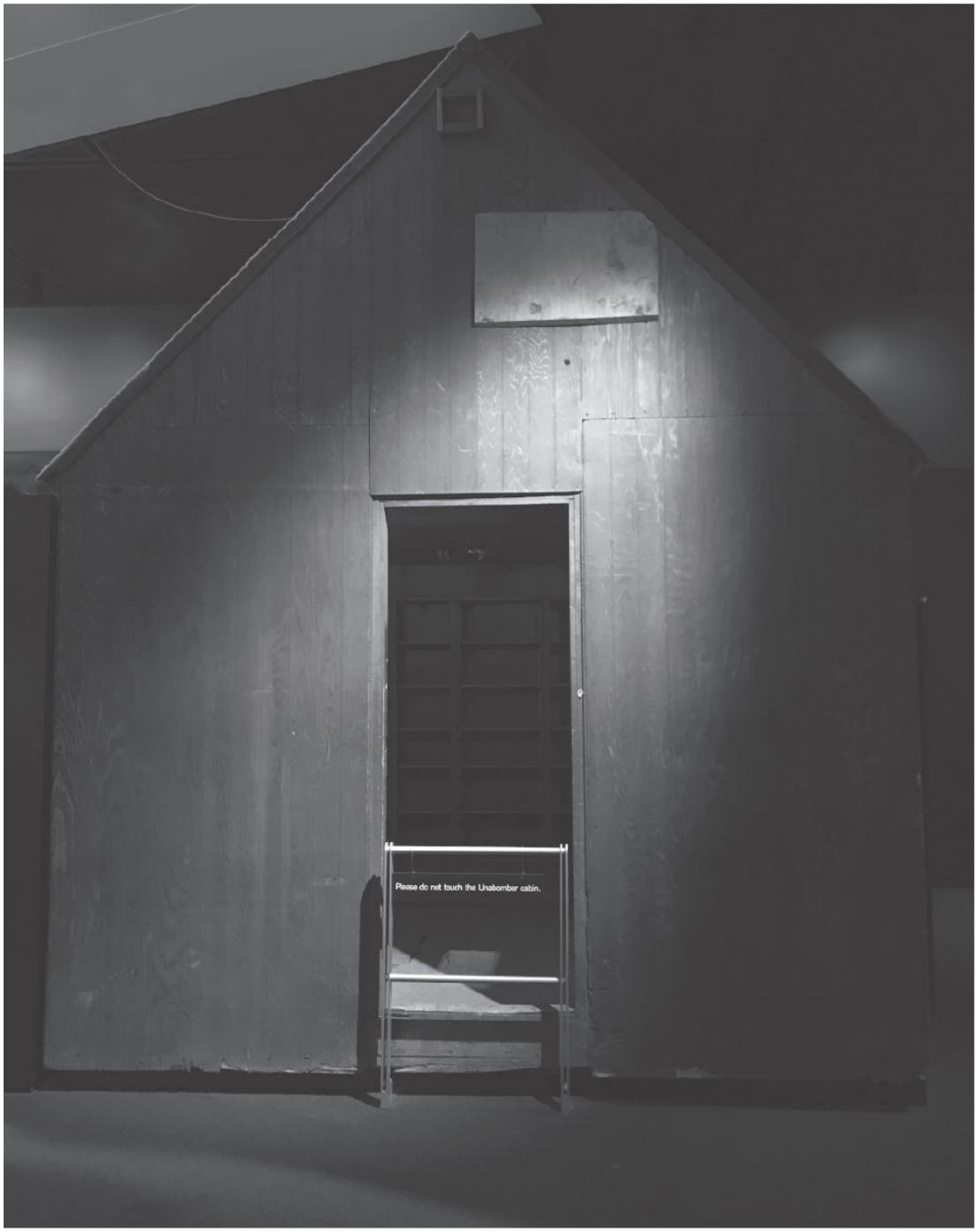
In 1971, Ted Kaczynski and his brother David bought a 1.4-acre plot on Bald Mountain near the Blackfoot River in Montana, where Ted would build his 10x12' house out of repurposed plywood from an abandoned cabin. The size of his house is about the same as his exemplar Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond, but Thoreau only spent two years in his cabin. Ted would be in his for twenty-five. Henry had visitors and threw parties at his place, and the windows were much, much bigger.

After Ted's arrest on 3 April, 1996, the cabin was emptied of two decades worth of belongings turned evidence. Without the books, journals, typewriter, snowshoes, oatmeal and baking soda canisters repurposed as bomb-making materials, the pots, pans, guns, the zither by the door, and the assortment of aviator glasses, the cabin is left a grimy wooden shell. It was removed from its little patch of land in the woods for safekeeping from vandals and souvenir hunters and stored in a nearby air base, until its big move in December of 1997. It was placed on its side on a flatbed truck and covered with a tarp as if it had laid down to sleep through the long 1,100-mile journey from Lincoln, Montana, to Sacramento, California. After a seventeen-year reign of terror, the country finally got a look at the Unabomber and the tiny cabin that came to represent the man and his manifesto.

In one photograph on the website of SafeStore USA — the company charged with transporting the cabin — a few people are gathered around the cabin after it had been loaded onto the truck. A reporter holds a microphone to a man and woman next to him, but it oddly looks as if he's holding the mic to the cabin, hoping for a quote, to get some insider information on the thing that knew Ted best. I see Ted's cabin as an unwilling accomplice. How was the cabin to know what Ted would be doing inside? The wood Ted used had a life before him, maybe as a fishing shack for long weekend get-aways, a pottery studio, or simply just storage. It's not the cabin's fault, don't blame it.

In the Discovery Channel series *Manhunt: The Unabomber* (2017), the cabin is sawed off from the stakes, strapped down, and lifted by helicopter, spinning through the air like an oversized Monopoly piece. It is the perfect silhouette of a house in its most reduced and perfect form. In reality, the decision to airlift the cabin was broached and ultimately vetoed, but it makes a dramatic image, this modest, little shack elevated to a totem of isolation, a single delicate thing dangling precariously over the streets of Lincoln.

The cabin was introduced in the trial by Ted's own defense team, who hoped that it would convince the jury of his insanity once they could see it and step inside his tiny, tiny world. Attorney Dennis Wacks said, "We want to show how [life in the cabin] affected his mental state. I think once (jurors) see all the evidence in all its totality, they'll see that Mr. Kaczynski had some psychological problems." Defense attorney



Unabomber Cabin, Newseum, Washington, DC (2019), author photo

Quin Denvir added, "While jurors are often taken to crime scenes in trials in this case, it was easier to bring the view to the jury."[1]

One detail in particular was brought to the jury's attention. There was no doorknob on his front door, just three padlocks. The defense hoped this little detail would be indicative of his paranoia, but my first apartment in New York City had three locks and a chain, so this isn't so weird to me. Even the size of his cabin was about the same square-footage as my room in that apartment. But the lack of a doorknob got to me. It's something I never thought much about before, the symbolic nature of it. Without it, the cabin is a bit less of a home. It falls into the "shack" category: somewhere to store objects, not to house people. It's not the number of locks on the door, but the refusal to even have such a small gesture of accessibility, this symbolic handshake inviting you into a place. Equally, it's not the smallness of his home that reveals psychopathy, but the lack of humanity, as if material simplicity was antithetical to personality. In all the grubby clutter, there was not one photograph, postcard, or image of a painting cut out of a magazine. Nothing to signify that a human being lived there. It is a space for a singular purpose that had little concern for life.

Once the cabin arrived at the warehouse in California, photographer Richard Barnes was the only journalist allowed inside. Writer Leah Worthington notes that *The New York Times* "wanted to see any architectural work in his portfolio, particularly of warehouses, though they wouldn't explain why."[2] The cabin sat flat on the concrete floor instead of suspended on posts embedded in the earth. It was framed by metal support beams and exposed pipes instead of tree branches, and the room flooded with stark fluorescents instead of filtered sunlight. Contained inside solid white walls and shot at a three-quarter view, the cabin could have been in an art gallery in Chelsea, an exhibit at MoMA. It stopped being a home and became an artifact, a symbol, a metaphor for something else.

Next was a series of black-and-white "portraits," with each side shot straight on (the interior was off limits to him). Barnes draped the walls of the warehouse in black, so the cabin appears as an artifact without reference to size or scale. It's a specimen. Each detail is in sharp focus; the grain of the wood, each precisely hammered nail. Twice removed from context, out of the woods, out of the warehouse/gallery, out of physical space entirely, the cabin floats in a void, in nothingness.

Barnes' *Press Conference with Cabin* (2004) is like the SafeStore USA photo. The cabin is outside, facing a crowd of photographers, video cameras, and reporters. With the door removed, it appears open mouthed, preparing to make a statement. The cabin poses for the paparazzi, taking its moment in the spotlight without that diva Ted soaking up all the attention before its next destination, where we would finally meet, in Washington, D.C.

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[1] *Kaczynski's cabin ends long journey*, CNN, December 4, 1997.

[2] Worthington, Leah. *The Man Who Shot the Unabomber Cabin.*

The Unabomber cabin was the star of the *G-Men and Journalists: Top News Stories of the FBI's First Century* exhibit at the now closed Newseum. There you could see the coat Patty Hearst wore when she robbed a bank with the Symbionese Liberation Army, a collection of crushed and dust-coated cell phones and pagers from the World Trade Center rubble, and a piece of rope used to climb into the Lindbergh baby's bedroom. But Ted's old house is the showstopper in the section titled "A Mad Bomber and His Manifesto."

I went to the awkwardly named and even more awkwardly conceived Newseum as soon as they announced it was closing, since it would be, in all likelihood, my only opportunity to see the cabin before it went back into whatever storage facility the FBI uses to store houses. It's disarming in person, almost cute. The ceiling of the museum space wasn't very high, and the cabin fit comfortably in a corner of the room. There were panels with other artifacts — newspaper clippings, the infamous police sketch, yellowed pages of the original *Industrial Society and its Future* — above a cutout through the little square window allowing one to peer inside, an experience Ted never would have allowed. Through the doorway you can examine the empty cabin and its walls of bare shelves. There's a black Ted-sized stain against the wall where he slept for twenty-five years on a plywood board covered with a thin layer of foam. It's a bit pathetic (like Kaczynski himself) and terribly lonely. There's a small barrier blocking entry with a sign reading "Do Not Touch the Unabomber Cabin." Like a good museum-goer, I respect archival objects, so I didn't. Before my visit I contacted the curator of the museum, asking if I would be able to enter the cabin for research purposes. In less than an hour, I received a terse and unequivocal "No." I forget sometimes that it's not just a house; it's evidence.

Before his death in 2023, Ted lived for twenty-five years (the same length of time as in his cabin) in a 12x7' cell in a supermax prison in Florence, Colorado; about the same size as his cabin, just a slightly different proportion. Kaczynski wasn't insane because he chose to live in a cabin. It seemed an unnecessary and dramatic gesture to haul out the house, one coming from a privileged position. All sorts of people all over the world live in very small spaces, whether it's their culture or their conditions. All sorts of people live off the grid, sometimes because they want to and sometimes because they have no choice. The defense team could count on an American jury of consumers, conditioned to desire *more*, to believe that needing or wanting less (less money, less space, less stuff) is tantamount to madness. Kaczynski had a laundry list of emotional, social, and psychological problems, but living in a cabin wasn't one of them.

Just to be clear, I don't give a shit about Ted Kaczynski. I don't think the fact that he might have had a few good points about the insidious hold technology has on our lives makes up for the fact that he murdered random, innocent people and hoped to murder a lot more. But I do think that houses retain some of the emotional human residue of their former inhabitants (and in Ted's case, a lot of physical residue). Perhaps that is why his cabin fascinates me, and why Barnes' photos are so haunting.

That much violence, bitterness, rage, loneliness, and spite, concentrated in such a small container, must leave something soaked in the wood. His house has always been more interesting to me than the man.

Ted Kaczynski relinquished his right to privacy and seclusion when he mailed his first bomb. He lost ownership of his beloved cabin when he was led away in handcuffs and taken into FBI custody. On the train back to New York from D.C., I immediately regretted my obedience to that little sign blocking the entrance. So the next weekend I went back, and I touched it.

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<www.repeaterbooks.com>
Explores the architecture of haunted houses, uncanny domestic spaces, and how the horror genre subverts and corrupts the sanctity of home.
ISBN 1915672643, 9781915672643

Watkins Media
Author's website: <www.leilataylor.com/sickhouses>