



# Station Eleven and other Transitory Homes

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If we were to simplify most buildings, we would have a box: four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. A container, essentially. Compared to wide open skies, a building is something that can entrap or shelter. But with these built boxes comes more, a sense of place, which is deeply tied to emotional responses. We love these boxes, or we hate these boxes. In the novel *Station Eleven*, Emily St. John Mandel depicts places before and after the Georgia Flu, showing how humans respond to these environments when it is impossible to return to what once was home. In support of this, Vera Benczik's "A heap of broken images': Objecthood, Apocalypse and Memory in *Station Eleven*" analyzes the interconnection between humans and their environment, particularly when objects are rendered dysfunctional. While homes and other spaces may have specific associations, physical or emotional, *Station Eleven* shows that the concept of home is transitory, shifting as our way of life calls for it.

Mandel's *Station Eleven* is made of intertwining stories from before and after the world's collapse. The *Dr. Eleven* comic within the novel ties together the many seemingly separate characters and events, from Miranda writing it, to Tyler explaining it to Arthur, to Kirsten quoting it during what she thought were her dying moments. At its core, the comic is about a society forced away from its home on Earth, longing to return but knowing they must come to terms with living on the travesty of a blue planet that is Station Eleven. The characters of Mandel's novel often echo the characters in the comic's Undersea: "We long only to go home" (302). This is depicted before societal collapse, as Miranda struggles through her identity as a wife to a movie star and then as a business executive, as well as post-collapse, as the world resettles,

establishes communities, and physically and emotionally rebuilds homes. Essentially, the characters are driven by their emotional responses to their environment and what they associate with home.

Benczik's "A heap of broken images': Objecthood, Apocalypse and Memory in Station Eleven" delves into human relationships with the object world. More specific than ecologies, yet broader than the built environment, the object world hinges on the perception of the world through the objects we interact with and experience in our day-to-day life. Indeed, all spaces are made up of objects. They are not just boxes or building shells, but what is contained in those boxes, ranging from fixtures like a moon-shaped lamp to pocket-sized magazine clippings. While the more permanent built environment may be easier to wrap one's mind around, the object world is essential when considering a space in relation to its occupants. Space is defined by location, function (or tasks performed in it), and objects. We cannot talk about setting without talking about what makes up the setting.

One's relationship to a space is not always best understood by considering its literal function. In *Station Eleven*, the role of Neptune Logistics as an office building is one of its lesser characteristics. For Miranda, Neptune Logistics acts as an escape, a home away from home, and it is this emotional response that gives it its significance. While many only associate an office with dreaded work, she prefers it over her apartment with Pablo. The apartment is dark and cramped, while she considers Neptune Logistics to be "the calmest [...] part of her life" (82). She rejects her literal home, due to its association with her unhappy relationship, and embraces Neptune Logistics as a more genuine home in an emotional sense. As Benczik asserts, humans and the environment affect and change each other (23). Miranda changes what, for many, would be a sorrowful office into the backdrop of her fantasies, Station Eleven in the *Dr. Eleven* comic. She spends her free time sketching and writing, and the building itself seems to transport her there, with its glass walls, impeccable view, and clean lines. In return, Neptune Logistics, as an extension of Station Eleven, transforms her. She embraces a vision of herself as a businesswoman and as Doctor Eleven. Neptune Logistics still functions as a place of work, but it suggests that the novel is beginning to stretch the bounds of typical associations of place.

While one's associations with a place can be inflated into something more pleasing, the opposite is also true. Upon Miranda's death, the notion of an "insufficient setting" is introduced. What are the qualifiers for a setting's insufficiency? Miranda feels that her hotel room is not "enough for the gravity of the moment," deeming it an "insufficient setting" (Mandel 226). A hotel functions as a temporary home but is not always homey in the emotional sense. As a hospitality space, it is designed to care for people, to provide them with amenities – fresh towels, a bed with clean sheets – to comfort them in what may be a strange, new city. But for Miranda, a hotel room, one of dozens of identical rooms, is not personal. For one who travels for work, it is ordinary. It is not practiced or "inhabited, walked through, observed and remembered" (Benczik 23) enough to be sufficient, rendering it only a transitory home. And now, with the

onset of the Georgia Flu, a hotel no longer functions without amenities or staff to attend to the guests dying alone in the corridors. Even so early in the collapse, it has become, in Benczik's words, "dysfunctional" with "no use beyond emanating the tragedy of the void left by the disruption of humanity" (26). Thus, Miranda flees the hotel for the beach with the same sentiment as those of the Undersea: she wants to go home. A temporary, transitory home bears deafening anonymity, and added dysfunctionality leaves the setting insufficient.

But a lack of staff and amenities are only some of the things that can result in the dysfunctionality of a space. The spaces not transient in the old world are now insufficient. After the collapse, houses are the most dysfunctional of the built environment, despite previously being associated with comfort and permanence. Houses are no longer homes. The object environment of home was dismantled as houses were raided, and people now reside in buildings of almost any occupancy class other than residential, such as the Severn City Airport. When exploring these forgotten homes, Kirsten and August respect that houses are of a different time. Kirsten may reenact turning on light switches and browsing bookshelves for something to read (Mandel 150), but ultimately, she looks past the original purpose and function of the house as a home. A house may provide useful supplies or objects, but that space can only trap her in the past. At the end of the day, everyone returns to their not-house home, to their caravan, their gas station, their airport. Transient "non-places" have replaced the traditional home (Benczik 27). *Station Eleven's* collapse upends spatial practice and our emotional responses to space.

But why exactly do houses not function? Why do people not want to live in them? Benczik approaches the explanation through De Certeau's theory of "haunted places" (23). In this case, haunting is not about past lives and spirits but is instead about memory. As Benczik remarks: "the layer of memories projected upon a certain location or object is the prerequisite for habitation" (23). However, this does not seem to apply to the forgotten homes in Station Eleven. If this were the case, houses would be reinhabited due to their familiarity, comfort, and ingrained memories. Benczik recognizes this and suggests that there are places "too haunted to allow habitation" (27). To those who lived through the Georgia Flu, houses may act more as a reminder of what has been lost than of the comforts that once were found there. It is the juxtaposition that works this magic. Objects of comfort define these past homes. They are riddled with technological devices and electrical wiring; however, they no longer work, leaving them dysfunctional. And they are full of copies of books that will never be printed again, leaving them painfully nostalgic. These comforts can never be experienced the same way again. Houses now only function as buildings to be robbed of those objects that still serve a purpose after the collapse. This combination of what is left and what is taken renders them too haunted. Houses cannot be homes when the objects left to define them have become dysfunctional and only act as a reminder of what has been.

The functions of spaces have been flipped. If houses can now only function like a Walmart, a place to look for resources, it is only natural that Walmarts have become the new houses. Nonresidential, transient places have become home. This seems illogical. Why would people settle down in places with fixtures bolted to the floors, not designed to be modified for domestic living? If Miranda could not stand the dysfunctional and emotionally unfulfilling hotel before her death, how could anyone else? But ultimately, many may have had no choice; it is where they ended up when it all happened. As Elizabeth asks at the Severn City Airport, “Where would we go?” (Mandel 237). Community serves a greater benefit than walking out alone.

Regardless of where people are stuck, “the interaction between the human element and the object world around them affects the construction of both” (Benczik 23). Even if they cannot alter the building shell, humans can build an environment that serves them. From the living quarters set up in tents throughout the airport to the Museum of Civilization as a tribute to the past object world, with the give and take between humans and space, houses do not need to be reinhabited or rebuilt, and transitory spaces can become home.

In the end, humans and their environment are deeply tied together, and this tie is even stronger when it comes to where one resides. This comes not only from physical shelter and the tasks that objects within a space enable, but also from emotional responses. Sense of place works hand in hand with memory or “haunting.” However, a space’s emotional significance is not always what one would expect, especially when events take a turn for the worse. Home is not always sufficient. Miranda’s gloomy apartment with Pablo is not sufficient. An untouched house Kirsten finds is not sufficient. Simultaneously, the opposite of a typical home could be just what one longs for. Miranda longs for Neptune Logistics. Kirsten longs for a reunion with the Symphony at the Severn City Airport. As Benczik makes clear, dysfunctionality severs former ties to space, but when “we long only to go home” (Mandel 302), humans will make even the most unseemly transient spaces into their new abode.

Benczik, Vera. “A Heap of Broken Images’: Objecthood, Apocalypse and Memory in Station Eleven.”  
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

Mandel, Emily St. John, *Station Eleven*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Harper Avenue, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 2014.

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*Header photo by Anna Bounds*

“Greensboro Opera House”

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