

Nicola Koller with Squint/Opera: 'This Sceptred Isle'

Nicola Koller is an architect whose research projects speculatively explore not only who we are, but who might yet become. 'This Sceptred Isle' examines current social trends and their ramifications for architecture and the built environment in England. However, Koller creatively extrapolates the trajectories of these trends, to visualise what our collective future might look like. Her film, presented here alongside a series of drawings, has been made with the architectural film-makers Squint/Opera. Squint/Opera's filmic realisation of her ideas combines humour and narration with cutting-edge design and illustration, to explore the problems of new housing, suburban sprawl, reliance on private transport and the transformation of the countryside into the location for agribusiness and a scenic palliative for cash-rich, time-poor urbanites.

Koller's work asks: what are the psychological and social effects, and how are our identities changed when our environment changes? In particular, 'This Sceptred Isle' extrapolates England's dual obsessions with home ownership and living in houses rather than multi-occupancy dwellings. English cities, as many commentators have noted, have been traditionally characterised by city-dwellers' insistence on inhabiting houses with their own garden, resulting in a suburbanisation and sprawl. For a densely populated small island, such cultural preferences present increasingly complex challenges. For one, over the last quarter-century various demographic changes – increasing time spent in education, higher geographical mobility, later marriage, increasing divorce statistics – mean that the rate of household formation has changed rapidly: 31% of households have only one person. Moreover, the English obsession with home ownership has its detrimental effects: and the proportion of owner-occupied households has steadily risen, from under 3 in 5 in 1981 to nearly 3 in 4 currently.

Though based on academic research, 'This Sceptred Isle' deals with issues which are anything but academic. The primary element of the project is a short video, which utilises the device of a week in the life of an ordinary suburban family to construct a satirical narrative in which numerous details convey what the state of the nation might be. Koller begins with the facts that England has a dire shortage of housing supply: though the current answer is to allow developers to potentially build 4,000,000 new homes before 2020, the majority being low-rise. Most of these new homes will require entirely new infrastructure – new roads to connect them; in fact Koller's England is akin to an endless spaghetti-junction of newly laid tarmac. Rather than inhabit medium-density apartment blocks able to be serviced by public transport, our collective preference seems to be towards individual plots of land and reliance on car ownership, despite predictions that oil supplies will be

drying up by the middle of the century. What will the literal map – and our mental map of the country – look like when a network of new flyovers intrudes between city and country?

In turn, universal car ownership is predicted to create increasingly severe physical and psychological problems: Koller's work dramatises a hypothetical scenario that has alarming features. Traffic jams mean that the average speed of a car in central London is slower than that of a horse-drawn carriage 100 years earlier. In terms of how we internalise our environment and create a sense of self in relation to our sense of place, Koller notes that road rage is becoming all but the default state for commuters: we now own on average 1.55 cars per household, and travel 10,738km in each car each year. How do we combat road rage? 'This Sceptred Isle' proposes alternative solutions and lateral thinking. Seeking to sustain their living through 'heritage', Koller imagines farmers providing a release for pressurised executives and their families through 'Road Rage Bovine Annihilation Zones'....

