

Peter Mitchell: Nothing Lasts Forever

Priestly House, Quarry Hill Flats, 1978

This colour photograph shows a white wardrobe against the wall of a room with mottled wallpaper and bare floorboards. The oblong, mirrored door of the wardrobe has been taken off and leans against the wall to the left. It's a deceptively simple image that draws us into the story of a building.

In the centre of the photograph is a slim single wardrobe, perhaps two metres tall and a metre wide, with narrow decorative panels on either side of the opening where the mirrored door once was. The removal of the door leaves a tall, rectangular black void. The carved decoration is in art nouveau style: a stylised plant with curling leaves and a long straight stem that ends at the bottom in a heart motif. The carving is picked out in bronze paint. The wardrobe sits on bulbed feet with a single deep drawer at the base, designed to be opened by two delicate metal handles. The left handle is painted the same white as the wardrobe. The handle on the right is missing, with just its dark metal base remaining.

Tucked under the wardrobe, resting on bare wooden floorboards, is a pair of worn court shoes, white with black high heels and brogue-style black toes. The two-tone shoes could belong to the 1960s or even to the era of the wardrobe, the 1930s.

Another pair of worn, yellow women's shoes are caught in the foreground in the bottom left-hand corner of the photograph.

To the left, leaning against the wall, is the **door** of the wardrobe. In its narrow mirror there is a misty, out of focus reflection of the opposite wall, with what appears to be a

montage of pop posters and pages from magazines, stuck up at various angles.

Were these pictures tacked to the wall by the woman who wore the shoes?

To the right of the wardrobe is a slim pillar, part of the structure of the room, with a strikingly angled, greenish skirting board. Like the rest of the wall, the pillar is covered in mottled wallpaper. Whatever the pattern might have been, it's now faded to pale brown, and the effect is strangely like marble. The sequence of rectangles – from the hazy mirror and the black void framed by stylised carving to the stained marble pillar - evoke a classical scene in decay.

But this room was once the height of modern architecture. Between 1938 and 1978, Quarry Hill was the largest social housing complex in the UK, built in the heart of Leeds, and influenced by the modernist social housing of Vienna and Paris. The 938 flats had modern conveniences like lifts, indoor bathrooms, a communal laundry and a waste disposal system. The planned concert hall, tennis courts, indoor and outdoor swimming pools and nursery were never built. The estate fell into disrepair and was demolished in the late 1970s.