had any connection to the current homeowners. His methods were equally devious, making his crimes hard to detect. He would steal only one thing at a time, which helped make it all but impossible to tell if something had been stolen or simply misplaced, if your kids had innocently moved it or if your spouse had put it away somewhere without telling you. You might think it's memory loss or early-onset senility; it's actually a patient burglar robbing you and your family in slow motion.

A burglar's typical list of considerations gets slightly more obvious from here. Do you own a dog? BEWARE OF DOG signs are, in fact, effective deterrents. Is anyone currently home? If not, are your neighbors around and likely to see something? Do you have a burglar alarm? One burglar explained to Wright and Decker how he would react to burglar alarms—and it certainly wasn't with the desired level of fear. If anything, alarms signal to burglars that you own something worth protecting and that your house is thus a good target. As that same burglar reasoned to Wright and Decker: "If they got alarms, then you can look for gold and silver and tea sets. If there's an alarm on the first floor, it probably ain't hooked to the top floor. If it's hooked to the top floor, then it ain't hooked to the attic or it's not hooked to the exhaust system." In that case, following a rigorous process of elimination, he would just go in through the exhaust system. As we already saw with Bill Mason, every building is a puzzle for a burglar to pick apart.

At the same time, these considerations also get more subjective, becoming unique to each burglar and to his or her own fears or financial circumstances. Does the burglar need money *right now*? Does he or she have an addiction that needs to be serviced immediately? Incredibly, as many as 70 percent of residential burglaries are estimated to be committed by drug addicts.



Many burglaries are inspired simply by seeing someone leave a house. Think of the burglar who was just standing waiting for a bus one day when he saw a couple walk out of an apartment across the street, carrying suitcases. On a whim, he let the bus pass, waited till the couple had driven off in a taxi, then promptly broke into their place. He hadn't been looking to commit a crime when he woke up that morning; he didn't see it coming until the very moment he noticed the couple walking out their front door with their luggage, presumably thinking of anything but home security. But now he knew they weren't there—so he struck.

Human variability aside, the idea of discovering some secret law of the built environment that will reveal exactly where and when a burglar will strike next has an undeniable appeal. The police in the U.K. think they are close to cracking the code, and they have instituted a remarkable architectural sting operation as a result.

### Capture World

You first spot the apartment from afar, thanks to a light still shining in the kitchen window. Walking closer and pulling the brim of your hat down closer to hide your

face, you see the top of what appears to be an open laptop computer sitting on the kitchen table. No one is there, working or surfing the Internet; in the minute or two you've had to study the place, you haven't noticed any movement inside, no other lights turning on or off. In fact, it looks as if only one light is on in the whole apartment.

You step up onto a small brick perimeter wall across the street to get a better look—just a low fence framing the yard of a multistory housing block—and sure enough, the laptop is sitting there alone, without an owner to be seen. Astonishingly, a digital camera has been left out on the table next to it, as if someone had been transferring photos from one device to the other, only to leave, maybe for the whole night, maybe just for a quick errand. Either way, no one's there right now, and that makes this your best opportunity.

Best of all, a living-room window partially hidden behind some bushes is slightly ajar—meaning that whoever lives there has taken zero precautions against burglary and thus practically deserves to be robbed (you tell yourself). It's instant karma—payback for his or her absentminded naïveté. So it's now or never. With one final scan of the surrounding street and a quick squint up at other windows in case someone might be watching, you confirm you're all alone. It's time to go. You cross the street, pop open the window, and slide in.

It's almost too easy. Immediately, you head for the bedroom, both to make sure no one is there sleeping and also to grab a pillowcase to stuff everything in. While you're in there, you notice it's oddly furnished; it's almost as if no



one really spends a lot of time here, as if it's just a place to crash, because nothing but a bed and a nightstand are in the room. It feels strange—but you're in now, so it's all about getting the job done, then getting out.

Quickly, you open the bathroom medicine cabinet, hoping to find some medications—but there's nothing. Then you go into the kitchen to pop open the cupboards one by one. Almost nothing is in them, which again seems strange, and you've also noticed that everything feels vaguely dirty, as if whoever lives here hasn't cleaned in a while. Anything you've touched—a doorknob or cabinet handle—has made your fingers feel oily, your palms a bit slick with something you can't see. If not for the laptop, which you head toward to grab, this would not have been worth it; now it's time to go.

Which is exactly when you hear the front door of the apartment burst open, and that word you've been hoping to avoid your whole criminal career echoes into the room around you: "Police!" Two officers sweep through the door, and it's far too late to get back to the open window and escape.

You're trapped—or *captured*, as the case may be.

"Capture houses" are fake apartments run by the police to attract and, as their name implies, capture burglars. They are furnished to be all but indistinguishable from other apartments, with the important difference that nearly everything inside them has been tagged using a chemical residue only visible under UV light. These chemical sprays and forensic coatings—applied to door handles, window latches, and any portable goods found

throughout the properties, including TVs, laptops, and digital cameras—are also known as SmartWater. Tiny Web-connected cameras film each room from various angles. Finally, a small team of officers waits patiently nearby, usually in an apartment next door or across the hall.

The perverse brilliance of a capture house comes from the fact that only the most abjectly paranoid burglars would ever suspect that the home, business, or apartment they've broken into is somehow not real, that it is not quite what it appears to be—that they have broken into a decoy, a mirage, or trap. Capture houses can be so carefully designed that a burglar might never experience the slightest sensation that something's not right or somehow out of place; they might thus never guess that they're inside a house or apartment secretly run by the police.

It helps that these capture houses are not isolated places, glowing like film sets on the outer edge of town; instead, they are normally flats in busy, multiunit buildings and on otherwise unremarkable streets. If you live in the U.K.—or even if you've only traveled there—you may well have seen a capture house yourself, but never suspected anything amiss. Perhaps a police-run apartment is in your very building.

The capture-house program began at the end of 2007 in Leeds, England, under the direction of Chief Constable Sir Norman Bettison of the West Yorkshire Police. Having proved successful in Yorkshire, capture houses are now spreading to nearly every major metropolitan region of the U.K., including such cities as Birmingham, Nottingham, and even London itself.



Just south of Leeds, in the city of Rotherham, Detective Chief Inspector Dave Stopford of the South Yorkshire Police described to me how the program worked, what its strengths and weaknesses have proven to be, and where it might go next. Individual capture houses are most often set up by a technical team of civilians working for the police, he told me. Technicians and local contractors with the necessary expertise install hidden cameras, microphones, fiber-optic or Wi-Fi networks, twenty-four-hour infrared cameras, and even the SmartWater sprays. Each capture house is then fully stocked, complete with electronic equipment, lights on timers, and bare but functional furniture. This makes the apartments something more like an elaborate ploy of interior design and electrical engineering—a wired-up simulation of contemporary British domesticity, all but indistinguishable from the real thing.

Laughing, Stopford explained that his officers once lacked the funds they needed to get the furniture and home goods to stock another new capture house—so one of his officers simply went around the police station, desk to desk, requesting any unused or soon-to-be-discarded personal furniture. Most of the officers contributed at least something—a bedside table, an old couch, a tattered carpet past its prime—thus creating what could be thought of as the ultimate distillation of a police officer's apartment: a space furnished only with things taken from local cops. If only the burglar later captured there had had an eye for law enforcement taste in interior design, he might never have broken in. It was as police-like an apartment as you could get.

Once apprehended, many of the criminals are shown DVDs of their break-in. This is not only—or even primarily—to embarrass them, but also to show off a bit, to demonstrate the ever-watchful, all-powerful eyes of the British police with their clever lenses hidden inside lampshades and ferns. The surreal, Warholian effect is to make it seem as if the burglars have inadvertently broken into a private film studio meant just for them, their fifteen minutes of fame captured on miniature cameras that only the most paranoid among them would even look for or see.

Chief Inspector Stopford explained that in many cases, a capture house will be set up to catch one specific person. The police will have studied the modus operandi of a burglar—someone who only breaks into first-floor flats, for example, where a window has been left slightly ajar—and they then design an apartment to attract that person. The effort is apparently worth it. A single burglar can raise the crime rate of an entire neighborhood; taking that one person off the streets pays huge dividends in reducing the overall local crime statistics. But it's not always a guaranteed success. Some of the fake apartments Stopford's officers have operated have been open for as little as one day before being hit by a burglar, while others have gone nearly a full calendar year without being broken into even once.

All this means that if you are the burglar in question, the local police have designed and furnished an apartment with you in mind. When you are next out and about, casing homes for a possible burglary, and you feel attracted



to a certain property, you have to step back and consider the almost science-fiction-like possibility that it was put there specifically to attract you.

The notion of the capture house is easy to adapt elsewhere, even at different scales. Bait cars are basically the same idea: they are "capture cars," left on the street with their windows down or even with their keys still in the ignition to attract passing car thieves. But if you give in to your baser impulses and try to boost the car, you'll find the doors immediately lock, trapping you inside, while an internal camera has already sent high-resolution images of your face to a nearby police crew. The car is GPS-tagged in case you try to get away.

Back in Los Angeles, Detective Chris Casey explained to me that entire fake storefront businesses have been set up around the city by the LAPD to trap would-be thieves, fences, and smugglers. He described how police officers would pose as pawnshop owners or even as black-market metal buyers to deceive burglars and thieves. The program is elaborate and expensive—but it works. Think of it as an architectural version of going undercover: not just officers wearing civilian clothes and using fake names, but an entire building or strip mall disguised and camouflaged as something else altogether.

What remains so interesting about the idea of a capture house is this larger, abstract notion that the houses, apartments, bars, shops, and businesses standing all around us might be *fake*, that they exist as a police-monitored surrogate of the everyday world, a labyrinth of

law-enforcement stage sets both deceptive and alluring. Indeed, beyond just trapping local burglars, the capture-house program's overriding and perhaps most successful effect lies in inspiring a distinct and quite peculiar form of interpretive unease among local criminals: the uncanny feeling that the very place you are now standing in is somehow not real but a kind of well-furnished simulation, a deliberate mirage or architectural replica run by the local police, overseen by invisible cameras recording your every move. As Chief Inspector Stopford somewhat overconfidently explained to me, even if you're looking for signs that a given home or apartment is a capture house, you won't find them. You won't know you've actually broken into a simulation until the police themselves come crashing in, looking for you.

The fundamental premise of the capture-house program is that police can successfully predict what sorts of buildings and internal spaces will attract not just any criminal but a specific burglar, the unique individual each particular capture house was built to target. This is because burglars unwittingly betray personal, as well as shared, patterns in their crimes; they often hit the same sorts of apartments and businesses over and over. But the urge to mathematize this, and to devise complex statistical models for when and where a burglar will strike next, can lead to all sorts of analytical absurdities.

A great example of this comes from an article published in the criminology journal *Crime, Law and Social Change* back in 2011. Researchers from the Physics Engineering Department at Tsinghua University reported some eyebrow-raisingly specific data about the meteorological circumstances during which burglaries were most likely to occur in urban China.



They found, for example, that burglars tended to strike when the temperature was "in the range of –7°C to 27°C," or approximately 19°–81° Fahrenheit. This is not entirely surprising, given that this corresponds quite well to the expected thermal window for most of the country. In a sense, it would be unusual to do *anything* outside of these temperatures. Undaunted by the inherent absurdity, the authors also found that instances of burglary could be correlated to a set of average wind speeds (for example, burglars seem to hit on days when the wind is blowing less than four meters per second in China, or roughly nine miles per hour) and even relative humidity (burglary, we read, is most likely to occur when the humidity is between 15 and 85 percent, another meaninglessly all-encompassing range).

Their conclusion is impressively vague. They write that burglary is "more inclined to occur in a comfortable circumstance," although quite a few burglaries also occurred during "extreme weather." Sadly, although the authors mention barometric pressure as a further influence on burglary statistics, they don't delve into any hard numbers.

But perhaps we shouldn't be so cynical. It's all too easy to mock these attempts at statistical measurement. It might sound ridiculous, for example, to learn that

burglary can be correlated to the phases of the moon—as if crime has its own lunar tides—but this, in fact, is borne out quite regularly. The reason is simple: a new moon equals less light to be seen by, and thus an easier time sneaking around someone's property or through an empty part of town.

No less a figure than legendary magician and escape artist Harry Houdini confirms this in his 1906 book, *The Right Way to Do Wrong*. Houdini describes the burglar as a kind of occult psychogeographer, someone uniquely attuned not only to the rhythms of the streets but to the phases of the moon above. Houdini writes that an accomplished burglar would have "consulted the almanac" before heading out for plunder, using astronomical timetables to help coordinate his heist with the orbit of the moon around the earth. Every bit of darkness helps. Then, when the almanac is right and the shadows are deepest, this astrologist-burglar with one eye on the stars and planets would make his fateful move.

Yet even a new moon works both ways. Burglars are humans, after all, and they are not immune to fear when wandering into a house in utter darkness. A great deal of the sociological literature indicates that too little light is as unnerving to a burglar as it would be for a homeowner to hear someone rummaging around in the dark. Think of the hapless burglar—one of my favorite examples yet—who called the police himself when he became convinced that someone else was in the house with him. He thought another burglar was somewhere out there in the



darkness, tiptoeing through the unlit rooms, perhaps heading straight for him.

Lunar phase aside, the question of when to strike a particular building is at least as important for burglars as where that building is located or how it is designed. If you don't want to read every issue of *Architectural Digest* looking for hints about which houses to strike, then you might want to look elsewhere for clues about who, what, where, and when to burglarize—such as reading people's Twitter feeds or Facebook updates.

In 2010, as social location services such as Foursquare achieved mainstream appeal, a semiautomated Twitter account called PleaseRobMe popped up. It began retweeting people's social status updates, but only those that seemed to indicate when that person was no longer at home. "Showing you a list of all those empty homes out there" was PleaseRobMe's tagline. Its point was not criminal, PleaseRobMe hastened to add, but sociological, showing how "oversharing," as it's termed, can have real-world security consequences, not the least of which is letting anyone in the world know when you've stepped out to a bar, a museum, a friend's restaurant, or a nightclub—or all of the above, in a multihour bender—and thus are no longer inside your apartment. All a burglar would have to do is check their target's Foursquare account (or Instagram or Twitter or Facebook feeds) to see how much more time they've got to get in and out undisturbed.

Consider burglar Tricia Schneider. According to the sheriff's office of Posey County, Indiana, Schneider

"admitted using Facebook posts to pick her targets" in numerous counties throughout southwest Indiana. Sheriff Greg Oeth explained to local media outlet WECT that online oversharing entails risks: "It's posting, 'Look how much fun we're having on the beach today. Here's photos of us at a very unique restaurant.' Those sorts of things [are an] indication that you're away from home and that your property is unprotected."

Or think about the New Jersey man who was also busted for using social media to choose his targets. Known by Hunterdon County police as the "Facebook burglar," Steven Pieczynski would wait until his own Facebook friends had posted holiday plans before raiding their empty houses. Note that these weren't, technically, strangers; they were people who had accepted Pieczynski's friend requests.

An even more astonishing example of social tracking comes from the case of the jewelry-store owner in Kansas City whose shop was robbed of up to $300,000 worth of merchandise. During the ensuing investigation, police found that the owner's car had been tagged with a GPS device—even her son's car had a tag—with the implication that their movements had been tracked for days, if not weeks, as the thieves waited for the perfect moment to strike.

It gets weirder. In the summer of 2014, a young man was arrested in Columbia, Tennessee, for having pretended to be a woman on social media. Luring local men into fictional dates, using pseudonyms such as "Young and ready 234" and "Lilwhitegirl1132," he would send his



prospective suitors literally down the garden path, giving them elaborate instructions to find, for example, "the end of Oak Park Drive and meet on a barely noticeable garden path on the dead-end street." They were then instructed to wait there. Meanwhile, the nineteen-year-old female impersonator was actually back at the target's house, stealing cash, jewelry, and other valuables. As Columbia Police lieutenant Joey Gideon instructed *The Daily Herald*, "The basic moral there is not to disclose anything online unless you know who that person is."

This sort of thing needn't only be online or even digital. In his 2001 study of burglary, criminologist R. I. Mawby learned that one burglar would actually pay other burglars to photocopy vacation rosters when they broke into offices late at night so that he could take note of any upcoming vacations. This can be extended to your own home: a common piece of advice for vacationing homeowners is not to write their exact vacation dates on their home calendar, precisely so that future burglars won't learn that you'll be gone for another three days, giving them all the time in the world to rifle through your valuables. Think of the burglar out in Joshua Tree, California, who drank all the beer in the kitchen before taking a nice hot shower, or even the Easton, Pennsylvania, burglar from 2010 who not only drank all the beer in the fridge and took a shower but, awesomely, *gave himself a haircut.* When the homeowner came back, she found him just sitting there, calmly watching TV, freshly shorn. If burglars know how long you'll be gone, they can basically move in.

Obvious oversharing aside, if your goal is to leave no clues for burglars—to make sure that they can never figure out when you are or are not at home—well, frankly, you just might not be able to do much about it.

In a study of how domestic systems such as home heating can be used by burglars to determine whether you and your family are away on vacation, a team of researchers presenting at a 2012 conference on computer security pointed out that you just can't hide that you're not at home. Given the right devices, they explained, "anybody with sufficient technical skills to monitor real-time energy consumption patterns in an entire neighborhood"—and they explain how this is possible—can determine when a particular house sees a precipitous drop in energy use. Either the residents have died or they're off on vacation somewhere, but either way a huge bull's-eye has appeared on their house. Automatic meter-reading technologies have very real security implications, the researchers conclude, and even this overlooks the ease with which someone could physically check your electricity meter to see if your monthly use has dropped off.

With this many possible signs to remember to check for, protecting yourself from research-oriented burglars can, to put it mildly, seem a bit overwhelming. Still, you can take some important and basic technological steps. For example, you can use a timer to turn lights on and off in your absence, and you can also buy a device called FakeTV. FakeTV is more or less exactly what it sounds like: a single-purpose lighting appliance that mimics the



shifting colors and motion of a regular television set. The result? It looks as if someone is home watching late-night television, with flashes of action and color flickering through the drapery. Set it on a timer, and your house has what sociologists Wright and Decker call "the illusion of occupancy," even though no one's home but machines.

Again, though, technical devices such as these risk being as obvious a clue as vacation photos on your Facebook page that you're not at home. Consider an article from 2013, published in the *Observer*, where we read about wealthy families in the Hamptons of Long Island all looking for a ritzier place to spend their holidays. Apparently so many people now leave the Hamptons for Europe each season that "whole neighborhoods are on timers." Every night, an otherwise empty neighborhood thus "lights up like the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center." One exasperated resident points out that the people next door "need to reset their light timer." Why? "They forgot it's no longer daylight savings time." The house anomalously switches on every night a full hour too early, making it even more obvious that, for all the light and electricity, no one's home.

What burglar could resist the appeal of such a scenario—the ultimate suburban heist, moving from home to home like some new Robin Hood of the Hamptons, timing one's entry and exit with the automated table lamps of families vacationing far away? You could break into every house in the neighborhood—unless those homeowners could find a way to keep their neighborhood off

the map altogether. A different sort of social media use suggests a way that small cities or entire neighborhoods might, in a relatively literal sense, remove themselves from the view of prospective burglars.

A passing remark in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* led me to the city of Bradbury, California. This is in itself ironic, as Bradbury—a private, gated suburb north of Los Angeles—has a careful policy of taking itself off the media radar. It does not want to be discussed. As Davis points out in *City of Quartz*, unless you are buying property there, Bradbury would prefer you don't know it exists.

Reporting on the town back in 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* remarked that, following a handful of crimes in the 1970s and as civic culture in nearby Los Angeles went from bad to worse in the eighties, Bradbury's "city officials and residents decided to become more closed-mouthed about their community. Each time an article appeared, they said, it drew attention to the city and the number of burglaries increased." The city managers therefore agreed not to speak to the media, effectively removing their neighborhood from public conversation. Already physically gated to prevent entry by strangers, Bradbury would now be subject to a kind of urban-scale nondisclosure agreement. Out of sight, out of mind—and out of the reach of burglars.

The aptly named Hidden Hills—another secluded semi-city in the economic orbit of Greater Los Angeles—has found a different way to remove itself from public scrutiny. Like Bradbury, the town does not appear on



Google Street View. The invasive cameras of the search-engine giant are not welcome on the private streets of either neighborhood, something not uncommon in the wealthier, private subdivisions and celebrity-dense developments north of L.A. The equestrian-oriented Bell Canyon, for example, also wealthy, private, and keen to stay off the maps of ambitious burglars, has joined them, opting out of representation on Google Street View. This secrecy only adds to their property values (presumably attracting the unwanted interest of future burglary crews).

Despite all the publicly available data, the disappointing truth is that burglaries more often than not are impulsive and unplanned, based on spur-of-the-moment decisions made in response to some immediately noticed detail: the window of that house was left open, that man clearly just left for work, likely leaving an empty house, or that the street is totally deserted and you have a pressing need for cash. The vast majority of burglaries are not particularly exciting (this book exists to shed light on the exceptions, not the rule). Statistically, burglary is far more likely to be committed by an opportunist drug addict smashing a pane of glass to steal a pair of diamond stud earrings and a DVD player than it is to be an organized gang of topology-obsessed underground-mining aficionados burrowing into a building from the structure next door.

There simply is no cut-and-dried rule for when, where, and under what circumstances you can expect a burglary to take place. Even the most general parameters are only

moderately useful for predicting when and where a burglar might strike next. Worse, trying to protect yourself against these outliers—against the special cases, the unpredictable break-ins, the addicts, and the impulse burglars—means that you run the risk of fortifying yourself against only the most outlandish scenarios.

## Burglars of the Ancient World

The question of how to protect and even fortify your home against a burglar's intrusion is a question as old as the home itself. Jerry Toner, a classicist at Cambridge University, teaches what he calls "history from below": looking at the popular entertainments, bodily sensations, and even the disaster-response plans of ancient Rome. One particularly memorable course focused on the lost smells of early Christianity. I learned that Toner was writing a new book about crime in imperial Rome, from vandalism and riots to murder and burglary, and thus thought it obvious that I should talk to him about breaking and entering in the ancient world. After all, no less a figure than famed Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero once asked, "What is more sacred, what is more inviolable, than the house of every citizen?" The injunction against breaking and entering is encoded in the very foundations of civic discourse.

Toner began by reminding me of a book I'd last read in my high school Latin class: *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. A major secondary story line of that book is the tale



of three thieves who steal the titular donkey—they technically steal a homeowner who has accidentally turned himself into a donkey during a conjuring trick gone awry. As Apuleius describes it, this proto–burglary crew would use axes not only to cleave open locked trunks, but to knock down or undermine the walls of private residences. The origin of the word *undermine* is straightforward and quite literal here, as it means digging a tunnel or mine under the walls of a building or city, causing those walls to collapse. They wouldn't bother with merely breaking the close, to return to the language of legal argumentation; they would obliterate the close altogether in a cloud of wood splinters and dust.

While peering out at a neighbor's house, our narrator sees "three great thieves attempting to / break down his walls and gates, and to open the / locks to enter in, by tearing away all the doors from / the posts and by dragging out the bolts, which were / most firmly fixed." They were dismantling the building, taking architecture apart in a literal act of breaking and entering. This would seem to make *The Golden Ass* a candidate for one of literature's earliest tunnel jobs, a second-century heist aligned with present-day police definitions of breaking through walls.

This example was just a prelude to a lengthy discussion by Toner of the criminal environment of Rome, a discussion that he prefaced by pointing out some key limitations to our knowledge of exactly what kinds of burglaries would have occurred there. First of all, Latin had no word for *burglar*; there were only variations on *thief*, implying a lack of attention to the spatial circumstances