

Tim Abrahams marvels at David Moore's photographs of the British government's panic room

As he made his meticulous photographic survey of the debating chamber in the House of Commons, David Moore kept a diary. In it he describes arriving in that strange sanctified space one morning ahead of his guide. 'We... were spotted by two uniformed and armed guards who, one of them, on seeing us and not our guide... reached for and unbuttoned his revolver,' he wrote at the time. His diary describes the world around his photographs, and his photographs, such as those in the compelling collection *The Commons*, explore the spaces between people.

Despite his travails with the guards, Moore writes at one point that 'the chamber gives an unreal sensation of security'. This strange combination of threat and safety inhabits his most recent series *The Last Things*, to be published in October. Between September 2006 and April 2007 Moore worked in a secure military location below central London, a Ministry of Defence crisis management facility. 'This space will be used as the first port of call in any situation where the state is under threat,' writes Moore. The facility contains a TV studio, a briefing room, a storeroom area full of the ID cards of occupants and



a suite for the prime minister, including bunk beds for the kids.

In many ways the collection is a companion piece to *The Commons*. The very fact that the facility exists and that Moore got access to it is incredible. 'I have been told that I was "very lucky", and as the MI5 guy said to me, "I don't understand how you have got this far"', says Moore. Yet the work Moore has produced transcends simple documentary. Whereas a series like Nick Danziger's *Blair At War* captures politicians acting out a self-conscious drama, Moore's *The Last Things* initially presents the world of military and political command as a system, a world that operates according to an inexorable logic which makes any individual action, especially a heroic one, impossible. The military personnel who oversaw Moore's shoot

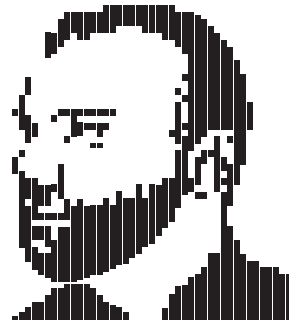
insisted that faces on cards be obscured, but didn't mind if a map of Iran appeared in the shot.

However, on closer scrutiny they are also remarkable readings of a space that is the product of humankind's darkest fears. This series of rooms was created in response to imagining what would happen if the world went very, very wrong. What makes Moore's pictures so good is that he understands the train of thought that has led to the facility existing. When he is forbidden from photographing certain rooms, he asks whether he may describe them. 'It was an emphatic "no" and "who told you about these rooms?" I gave an unsatisfactory explanation of how I even knew about them. The truth was that no one told me anything, you just get to understand that certain things exist,' says Moore.

Yet it is incredibly mundane as well. The Formica bench behind which post-apocalyptic news broadcasts would be made is scuffed and dented. Indeed the wood veneer lectern and the nylon carpets remind one of an insurance company office in Maidstone. Moore, who also teaches photography at Central St Martins, has been in similar terrain before with his *Office* series of portraits, shot at the end of the 1990s. Here, though, the office has taken over and become all-consuming. This office can become not just the seat of executive power but the only place left after Armageddon. What would life be like trapped in this facility? Better to be fried alive by a dirty bomb than spend your remaining days in here.

David Moore's The Last Things, opens at Belfast Exposed, Belfast, on 22 August

THE SUBJECT BY PETER KELLY



A design of gravity-defying angles based on apparently random motifs is something we've come to expect from Frank Gehry. On this front, at least, his Serpentine Pavilion this summer did not disappoint. According to Gehry, the four-pillared structure was inspired by Da Vinci's wooden catapult, while the timber-framed window panels that form a scattered, erratic canopy were supposed to evoke a crowd of alighting butterflies.

More surprising was how clumsily it was executed. The proportions of the structure seemed to have been awkwardly compressed and reorganised since photographs of Gehry's model were circulated a few months ago. The handrails and crude finishing of the ground level compromised the chaotic aesthetic and seemed a sop to sponsors or health and safety officers.

Building magazine's Martin Spring described the pavilion as 'gawky, hefty... clunking'. Tony McIntyre, writing for *Building Design*, called it 'squiggle-driven' and took issue with the 'dishonesty' of its structure, which was steel disguised as wood.

It all seems a wasted opportunity. The Serpentine Pavilions have always provided a chance to experiment, an opportunity to sketch out ideas on a large scale and in three dimensions. The pavilion is only there for three months; why not try out an idea that might be developed for the future?

Instead, Gehry's pavilion seemed to be a superficial leap into his past – evoking the rough-and-ready chain-link and timber construction of his own house in Santa Monica, but built with a corporate budget and without the architect present during the construction. **All this made the boundless enthusiasm of critics in the mainstream press all the more peculiar.** 'The rhythm is mostly glorious,' said Tom Dyckhoff in *The Times*. Jonathan Glancey unblushingly compared Gehry to Bach and Picasso. Jay Merrick produced a eulogising torrent of words: 'It expresses a morality based on a desire to absorb and re-express influences, activities, emotions.' Even the ordinarily austere Ellis Woodman, writing for *The Telegraph*, described the pavilion as 'wonderful'.

Were they blinded by the Gehry's world-conquering populism and determination to be considered as an artist guided by inspiration? Or were they irreversibly impressed by the pavilion when it was still a building site and the DIY aesthetic made considerably more sense? More worrying is that the response seemed a collusion in Gehry's most gravity-defying trick: dazzling the public with showmanship and sketchy designs.



Above: A stained chair in the bunker's TV studio

Left: The storeroom area which holds occupants' ID cards